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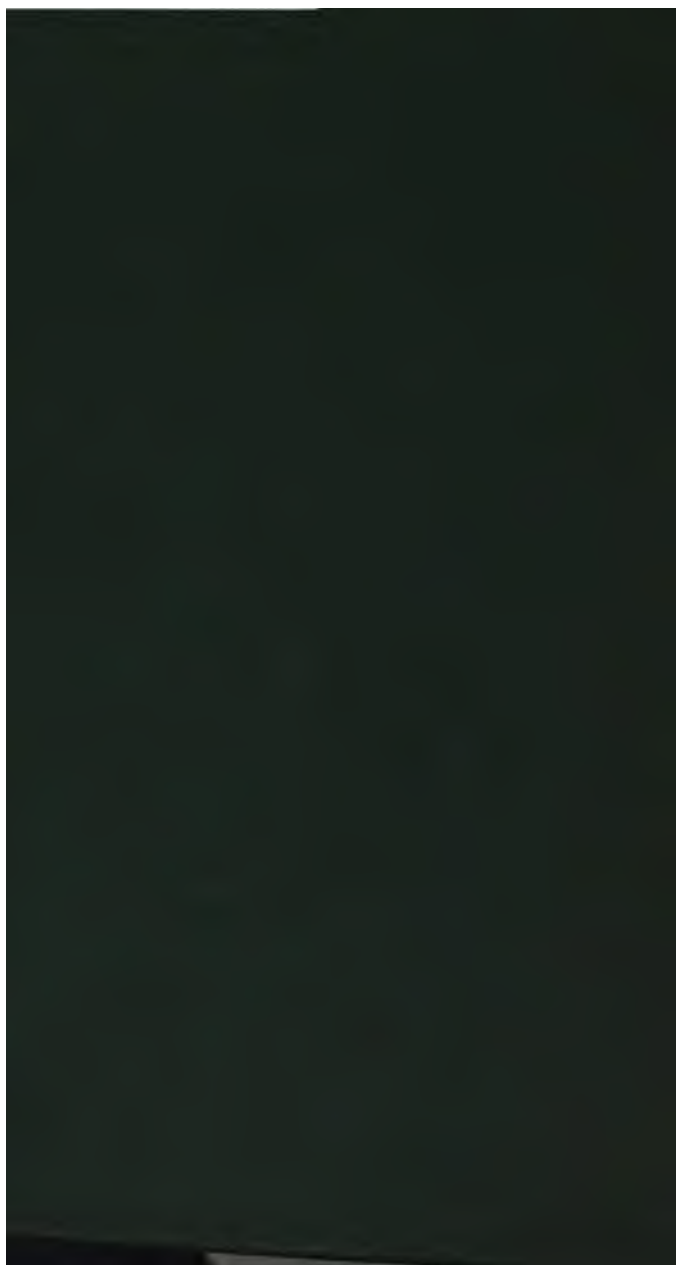
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JOAN SEATON

A STORY OF
PERCIVAL DION
IN THE YORKSHIRE DALES

BY
MARY BEAUMONT



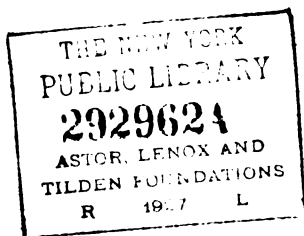
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PROLOGUE

THE five children were gathered on the porch-steps at Thurstane. Parsifal lay across the dale. The bees hummed about the children and the old single roses climbing up the walls. It wanted an hour of noon, and it was high summer. The warm air vibrated to the childish voice of Agatha Stansfeld.

She was reading from a copy-book on her knee. On the step below her sat her brother Humphrey, straight and dark, and behind her leaned Kirster Seaton, the oldest of the party, tall and strong-limbed, his fishing-rod at his side, and his arm round Joan, his little sister. Joan was fair-skinned like Kirster, and her hair yet more golden than his. She was very busy with her doll, which was made of a porridge-stick, and dressed in a kitchen duster, but the duster was hidden by the white and yellow of the daisy chains she

had wound about it. Ralph Pigot slipped slowly off the step to the ground. He was no relation of the rest, yet was more familiar and better known to them than any other child in the neighbourhood. Their forefathers had been battle-comrades and private friends for centuries, with an occasional historic break in the friendship still remembered in the dale.

The bees hummed, and Agatha read: "So when Sir Thomas saw that it was the false hound who had plotted against the king, he shouted '*Traitor!*' in a terrible voice, and rode fiercely against him, breaking his spear, and cleft him to the saddle-bow."

"Hear, hear! Hurrah!" from Kirster and Humphrey.

"I'd have torn his eyes out first," cried Ralph, who was lying on the gravel and flicking the bees with his whip.

"Then you'd have been an unchivalrous brute," said Humphrey, hotly.

"Brute yourself!" returned Ralph, crimsoning all over his beautiful gipsy face; "I'll fight you if you say that again."

"Be quiet, lads," said Kirster. "What a fire-head you are, Ralph." He kicked him gently with his foot ;—"go on, Agatha."

"And when the battle was over and all the country round was thickly covered with French corpses——"

"That's right," broke in Humphrey.

"The king, who was surrounded by his knights, beckoned to Sir Thomas Stansfeld. 'Take this chain,' he said, 'Sir Thomas, and wear it for love of me, for you have slain the greatest traitor against our realm.'" The child's voice trembled with the excitement of her own story.

"That was *our* Sir Thomas," said Humphrey, with pride.

"There were Pigots there who didn't do so badly," said Ralph, huffily.

"And Seatons," added Agatha ; "you remember, Kirster ?"

Kirster's blue eyes shone. "Ay," he said, briefly.

"I'm only telling about Sir Thomas to-day. Ralph," she continued, apologetically, "it's nearly

done." A shadow crept over the pale little face, her voice sank to a dirge. "But a messenger came out from Thurstane to Sir Thomas in France with very evil tidings. He told him his fair wife was dead (she had been Joyce Seaton, Kirster), who was the sweetest lady in the land. Sir Thomas leaned upon his sword and wept; he did not care for the gold chain nor for the king's praise that day, because he had lost what he loved more than all besides. And he prayed the king to let him go back to his own country, and afterwards he went a pilgrimage all for her sake, and came home a holy man. He died after founding the chantry at Yorely, and he was always faithful to his lady. He never married anybody else," she impressed upon her listeners.

"Well done, Agatha!" shouted Kirster and Humphrey together.

"Poor Sir Thomas!" murmured little Joan to her doll.

"Good enough for a lass," said Ralph, carelessly, getting up and whirling his arms about his head. "But he was a softy; there were

lots of other women, he could have got a bonnier in a week."

"O, Ralph!" exclaimed Agatha, horrified. "O, Ralph!" echoed little Joan, frowning at him because Agatha was grieved. Kirster was lost in the days of old.

"That's what *I* think," said Ralph, doggedly. "What's a woman? She's only an old lass. I make nothing of lasses. I should have put a fine stone at her head, and got an old monk to say masses for her, and I shouldn't have fashed my head about her again."

"You'd have deserved your head punching," said Humphrey, indignant at these criticisms on his sister's story and his ancestor, and warding off the blow aimed at him by Ralph. But the other flew at him again, his eyes flashing.

"Kirster, Kirster!" screamed the little girls.

Kirster rose like a tower, pushed aside Humphrey, seized Ralph, and laid him on the ground. "Look here," he said, sitting on the prostrate combatant, "what's the use of being such a tiger-cat?"

"Let me get at him," shouted the boy, struggling; "what's a Stansfeld but a peacock?"

"What's a Pigot but a donkey," said Kirster, holding down his arms, and making so comical a grimace that the standers-by laughed; and Ralph, knowing the impossibility of defying this combination of strength and good nature, lay passive, his ill-temper oozing away.

"Here's mother," cried Joan, "and such a big plate of brandy-snap."

"I should have thought it was too hot to fight, even for lads, to-day," said the new-comer, a pretty woman, with bright eyes and a brilliant colour, putting the gingerbread upon the step, and surveying the party.

"Kirster's not fighting," urged Agatha, "he's only keeping Humphrey and Ralph quiet."

"Quiet!" echoed the woman, raising her eyebrows, and lifting her hand to put Kirster's collar straight. Though he had but this month entered his teens, he was a head taller than his mother.

"Did you make the brandy-snap yourself?" he said, kissing her with boyish fondness.

"Of course, child ; nobody else has any time. There are nine pieces, and one's big enough for two."

"Let's race for it," cried Ralph ; "twice round the courtyard, starting from the gateway. Joan and Agatha first, me and Humphrey next, and you last, Kirster. Mrs Seaton, you'll say, One—two—three !"

Kirster's mother stood on the step. "It's too hot, children," she remonstrated.

"No, no !" came from the scattering group—they were in their places in an instant. Joan, young as she was, was a fair match for Agatha. Her curling hair had escaped from the ribbon, her cheeks were scarlet, and her grey eyes danced, one dimpled leg was well advanced. Humphrey and Ralph stood foot to foot, eager, excited, both pairs of eyes fixed upon Mrs Seaton's lips.

And ten or twelve yards behind was Kirster, broad-shouldered and long-limbed, with a fine Norse head, every muscle ready.

"One—two—three !"

There was a clatter of feet, and a flash of

colour past her, clatter and flash again, and Kirster, breathless, was at the gateway an arm's length in front of the younger boys, who came up together, each glad in his heart that it was Kirster, not the other, who had won.

"We didn't get start enough," gasped Ralph.

"I'm glad *you've* got the brandy-snap," said Joan, tossing her sunny mane, and clinging to her brother.

"He's so big he needs two pieces for your one," said Mrs Seaton, turning back into the house with a contented smile, as if the result of the childish race pleased her.

"This," said Kirster, grandiloquently, holding up the crisp brown sheet so that all might see, "is for these fair ladies. I won it for them at the price of my blood and treasure."

"Blood and stuff!" scoffed Ralph, stretching his graceful body.

"Kneel, kneel, Sir Christopher Seaton," cried Humphrey. And Kirster knelt before the two little girls, who clung to each other shy and laughing, and broke the coveted "brandy-snap" in half.

"Now, let's race again," called out Ralph a minute later, springing up from the step. "Come on."

"I can't run any more, Ralph," said Agatha, her sensitive face clouding.

"All right, come on—all the rest of you!" he commanded.

Joan caught his jacket. "I'll run too, I'm never a bit tired; no more is Humphrey. Come, Kirster!" She pulled the younger lads by the hand.

Kirster was apparently quite ready for a run. He had gone a few paces towards the gateway, when he looked back at Agatha, and quietly retracing his steps, threw himself down by her side.

"It's too hot," he said, "I'll stop here with you." Her eyes sparkled.

"Will you, Kirster? that is nice!"

"It's hot; besides, I'm spent," he shouted, to the remonstrances of the others.

"Spent!" they mocked. "Be quick!"

"No, I'm out of the race," he cried, "but I'll give twopence to the one that wins; three times round!"

"He's oot o' t' raäce," said Humphrey, using the dale-tongue with relish. "Ah'll giv' thoo a penny o' it, Joan."

"Now, tell me about Sir Miles Seaton, Agatha," said Kirster, getting his head further into the shade of the porch.

"I think *you're* like Sir Miles, Kirster"—her eyes looked at him lovingly—"don't you remember?—'*Never but two in the king's army could draw Miles Seaton's sword.*' Some day you'll be just as brave and as big."

Then she told him the tale of Sir Miles, the old crusading ancestor.

When the stars had taken the place of the sun, and the bees had left the roses, Agatha sat up in her little white bed, her eyes dark with sorrowful dreams. "O, I wish," she sobbed, "he hadn't been out of the race; and I believe it was all for me." The tears ran down her face. "I wish, I wish he hadn't been out of the race."

CHAPTER I

PARSIFAL

PERCIVAL-DION is a strange name as seen upon the map, but it is stranger as it is pronounced by the inhabitants and by most of the dwellers in the dale. To them it is *Parsifal-Dion*, more usually *Parsifal*.

And when a stranger hears it, he is apt to exclaim and fall into dreams. If the sunset is streaming over Danbrigg and filling the valley with a glamour of saffron, he looks away and along the road for a hint of the company of the Table Round, and finds himself taking Scropely Castle for the towers of Camelot. But his informant will probably say over his shoulder, as he turns away :

"Neä, neä ; Ah deänt see onything oot o't way in't neeam, it's allus been ould Parsifal." The critics, honest gentlemen, were much exercised by it. They invented several theories to

account for it, all remarkably ingenious, and none satisfactory. But of late they have adopted the old tradition of the inhabitants, backing it with even more learning and enthusiasm than they displayed in advancing their own views. By this time, indeed, they are forgetting that there was ever anything to discuss. They are solemnly convinced that Parsifal preserves the ancient pronunciation of a family of Westmoreland origin, and that Dion is a contraction of St Dionysius, the saintly Archbishop of York, who, the people say, built himself a wind-swept hermitage in the field known as the Chapel-garth, where, once a year, he retired for prayer and praise.

Parsifal-Dion has not advanced as it ought to have done. My story lies forty years back in the century, but even now the little farming-hamlet on the side of Askedale lags far behind the age, as perhaps the great dale itself does.

The natives are indeed speaking two languages now instead of one, that fine Scandinavian-English preserved by a circle of remote poets. But the new one is worn a little stiffly, as are

their Sunday clothes. And in the days of which I write, men of all ranks, when the heart was moved, found no adequate means of expression outside the old North Riding tongue.

Parsifal still rejects many of the improvements of science, and calls them "new-fangled gim-cracks." It still preserves the scythe in preference to the grass-cutter, and holds that the "gress" is better cut by it.

Only the other day an old farmer said to me that "a live man nat'rally handled a scythe better nor a deeäd thing o' wheeals an' chains." And though I cherish rather "forrard" views with regard to farming matters, I am afraid I acquiesced. We were standing high on the hill-side above the village, and looking down upon the rich meadows in the valley, the "bottoms," as Askedale calls them. There was a whirring in the air, and below us a green and moving cloud caused by the grass-cutter in John Netherby's garth, for John has an open mind, and is an object of interest and suspicion for ten miles round. Fifty yards away from us were Heseltine's son, Bryan, and two of the farm-lads,

in such magnificent attitudes for the display of muscle and brawn, and coming with such rhythmic regularity to the end of their row that the machine seemed a miserable substitute.

But once I had spoken somewhat differently to John, and now, when I meet him in his cart, or tramping forward to Hornaby, I imagine a twinkle of detection in his eye.

At Parsifal the spring water brought from the pump in the middle of the village in great bright tins, and carried upon the back, is "for-iver better" than the same water conveniently conveyed in pipes.

The last pillion appears on market-day at Fors, with William Wynne's comely old wife upon it, clinging to the leathern belt about his body. To this day she asserts that this fashion of riding "becomes a woman a sight mair nor joggin' aleän to market."

The sun, the moon, and the planets are still held by many to have a considerable influence on human affairs. There has always been a certain over-dress of belief in the doctor, and even in the parson, but it is still very apt to fall

off and reveal the native garment of superstition. It is said that Lizbeth Metcalfe, solely owing to the persistence with which the people of Aske-dale consulted her for every disease and in the most of misfortunes, added garth to garth and increased in goods at a rate which was a plain tempting of Providence. Providence, in the dale, is scarcely accounted one with the Most High, but occupies, apparently, the position of a divine estate-agent—divine certainly—but not too divine to experience the passions of frail mortality. It must be understood that it was the extent of her possessions, not her manner of acquiring them, which was regarded as perilously encroaching upon the indulgence of Providence.

But the ancient virtues still abide. The soil which has tenaciously cherished old superstitions has fostered in some minds a religious faith and a spiritual insight to be matched only in the lives of the greater saints.

If the emotions are simple, they are strong. If the people hate they also love, and if for the greater part of mankind they entertain a species of toleration tempered by suspicion, the suspicion

never hinders hospitality. In the time of which I write Parsifal was less enlightened, less moved from the ways of its forefathers good and bad, and yet more interesting than now.

I left it in my mother's arms; I returned to it at sixty. My wife and I had talked of that return for thirty years, but she died and I came back alone. I have lived there ever since. The people I am going to write of, and the place I write in, are better known to me than any other place and people, and my story is of my cousin Joan Seaton.

CHAPTER II

THE OLD HOME

THE day had been as wild and wet as if August were mid-October. All Parsifal had stood at its doors, or turned out into the grassy lane down the middle of the village, when the evening brought fine weather. The light was failing in the west, and the Ridder rose dark against a pale sky splashed and barred with flame.

Upon the high natural terrace with its hanging woods, leading from Parsifal to Feldfoot, and just beyond the last house of the village, two figures stood—a man and a woman. The man's face was in shadow. Dark he seemed to be, and tall, with a great spread of shoulder, the more striking because he was otherwise lightly built. His hat lay far to the side, and in the pose of his figure there was a jauntiness more common in smaller men.

The girl stood facing him, radiant in the

dying glow. The warm brightness of her hair, the dark brows above the blue-grey eyes, and the pliant beautiful figure, spoke to a dale-dweller of a "red" Stansfeld. For the Stansfelds, perhaps the oldest, certainly the most prolific family in the dale, are of two kinds, the "red" and the "black." The red are of a fair colouring, ruddy or golden haired, and the black have an olive cheek, and hair swart as the last raven on Earne Nab. To both belong the blue-grey eyes and straight brows, and a swift onwardness of gait, as of those who know their goal and are eager to reach it. The wife of Dan Stansfeld of Lower Ghyll has been heard to say, that if any one of her four sons had opened a black or brown eye to the light she would have disowned him. "I'd as lief have nursed a Spaniel," she said, but she meant "a Spaniard."

The girl's name was not Stansfeld, but Joan Seaton. Her father, Anthony Seaton, had married Judith Stansfeld, cousin to the Stansfelds of Thurstane, and the girl "favoured" her mother's family.

She had just come out into the warm late beauty of the evening, bareheaded, and in her light print frock, after the way of the women in Parsifal—to whom a head-covering suggested noontide, and a hat and mantle brought Fors Market or Yorlby Church to mind. Though the Seatons held themselves high, it was not in simple everyday life that they desired to differ from their neighbours. She held in one hand a snow-white wooden rolling-pin, with which she softly tapped the palm of the other as she spoke.

"It's time for you to go home, Rafe," she cried. There was an admonitory note in her voice. It was a sweet voice, that gave you a sense of latent force—even in a few words.

"That's civil, at any rate," answered the other, but without irritation. "Now, Jane Caley has a different word on her tongue—it's 'Come in, Mr Pigot, and dry your coat,' or 'Do sit a minute and tell us what's doing in Fors; sit down and try one of my new pasties.'" He looked hard at the rolling-pin: "I can almost smell yours, Joan; are they raspberry?"

"They're not for you to-night, Rafe, and when Jane Caley knows you as well as I do, she'll be for knowing the best place for you."

"Well," he went on, smiling with a white gleam of teeth, "give me that bit of rosemary at your neck and I'll go, as you're in such a precious hurry." He held out his hand for it.

She made a confused movement, as if she would have loosened it from her brooch, but a swift change passed over her face, and she dropped her hand. Her companion took a step forward.

"What's that for?" he cried. "If I'd asked you for a ——" he broke in, hastily.

"Don't be silly, Rafe! What nonsense you do talk. You're not quite—you stayed too long at the Bull to-night."

"And what's to hinder you from giving it me, if I did? Talk of Jane, she'd dig up the garden if I asked her, and set herself on the top of it."

Joan's dark brows drew together, and her mouth straightened.

"You make much too free with Jane's name," she said, severely.

"What's to hinder you, I say," he asked again, hitting his riding-boot angrily with his whip.

"Asking's not having, and I keep my reasons to myself. But see, you shall have one of mother's best roses, if you are riding past any day soon, they're a grand show just now. That is, if you'll ——"

"If I'll go home; well, I won't. Not till I get that sprig of rosemary." He planted his feet wide, and swung his whip to and fro. "And why do you always talk to me as if I was daft, or a child? You seem to forget that I'm a man!" Here he struck at a birch sapling by the roadside.

Joan reddened and lifted her head with a quick impatience.

"And are you?" she exclaimed. Her eye caught something above, on the lower slope of the Ridder. "Are you?" she repeated, a curious deep throb in the words, "See, that's what I call a man!" She pointed upwards with a free, dramatic movement. He turned; down the furthest meadow and making direct

for Feldfoot, strode a dim figure surrounded by four leaping shadows of dogs. On the air wavered a thin "Good-night." There was silence between the pair on the road, the girl's cheeks were on fire, she was vividly regretting her impulse. The man stood still as a stone.

"Good-bye, Rafe," she said at last, trying to speak carelessly. If he had been affected by the Bull's good cheer, he had shaken off its influence and was sober enough now. His jaunty air had left him, and he set his hat straight with a kind of nervous vigour.

"Joan," he bent forward the better to see her face, "what do you mean by that? When did you take Humphrey Stansfeld for a pattern?"

"He's everybody's pattern, I fancy, when he's set against one of your make," she answered crossly, annoyed with herself and with him, "but if you are not going, I am."

He plucked her by the sleeve. "Not yet, no, not till I understand a bit better! Joan Seaton doesn't hold with that sort of talk; when she cracks a joke it isn't that sort of joke,

neither. You're not the lass to pick out a man that road unless he's nought to you, or pretty near everything. Which is it?" He shook her arm roughly. In the deepening twilight her face looked pale, her voice was gentler, even propitiatory.

"Don't pull my sleeve, Rafe, it's thin, and won't stand pulling. Be a good lad, do. It's getting late, they will be wondering where I am." She quietly tried to disengage herself, but he held the stuff firmly in his fingers.

"Which is it, I say? You've no call to stop a minute longer than you like. It's only a word that's wanted." He drew close to her side. She saw the burning eagerness of his eyes, she was conscious, too, of a faint smell of whisky. Her indignation rose again, and she stepped quickly back.

"Do go away; take your hand off my sleeve! It's no business of yours, but if you want an answer, you shall have it." She laid her hand upon the sprig of rosemary, her voice trembled. "Humphrey Stansfeld gave it to me, if you must know, and I wouldn't give it to anybody

in the world." She looked proudly and defiantly into the passionate eyes above her, and dragging her sleeve from his slackened hold fled back down the village street. There was a vague disquiet at her heart. In Parsifal *nerves* was a word whose meaning had not then been fathomed. The strength of the hills and the freedom of the winds entered into the life-blood of the people. But to-night Joan was startled by the cackle of the blackbird as he sought a thicker cover, and she jumped as nervously as the most high-strung woman of fashion when Sally Wynne touched her shoulder from behind. Sally laughed. "Why, Joan, what's t'matter?"

Joan laughed too. "I thought you were a flay-bogle," she said. Though the night was coming fast, the flash of fun in Sally's eyes was quite perceptible.

"A flay-bogle! Ay, Ah'm all that to some fowk, but niver to them Ah'm fond on. Joan, didst tha turn thi brass when t'moon were young an' mak thi coortsy. Ah deeänt like t'see thoo oot to-neet, there's na luck when she's

gannin'¹ that gate." She pointed with her short arm to the disfigured outline of the old moon peering above Thurstane Scar.

"She looks as if she wants burying. But I'm not afraid of her, Sally. She was better to me than I ever thought a moon could be when she was new, and I courtesied three times in the garden, and three times in my own room. She *was* bonnie."

"But yo' niver seed her for t'first tahn² thruff t'winder?" Sally strove anxiously to look into Joan's face.

"I saw her first when I was standing with—when I was standing by the gateway at Thurstane. She was very good to me; but mother will be coming after me if I don't go. Good-night, Sally!"

As she went the tones of Humphrey's voice, as they stood together under the ancient arch, came back to her, and for the time her meeting with Ralph was forgotten.

Parsifal is a collection not of cottages but of small farm-houses, some fifteen or sixteen of them, thick-walled and square built. Those on

¹ gannin'—going.

² tahn—time.

the low side are the larger and the more picturesque, owing to the bit of garden-ground in front and the masses of ivy and old-fashioned roses which clothe their walls. Almost every house has its bush of leopard's-bane, which makes a summer glory at the gates of spring. Here and there a labourer's cottage is squeezed in between two of the houses. And the irregular line of buildings is broken twice by a grassy close of elm trees walled round, having a couple of stiles, one opening to the wide dale, and another at the upper end leading into the green uneven lane running through the village—or the *town*, as the self-respecting native calls it.

The upper side of Parsifal is a good deal broken. There is the great house, Parsifal Head, large only by comparison with its neighbours. Compared with the Tudor and Jacobean halls and granges, scattered over the dale, it is uninteresting enough. But when it was built, seventy or eighty years ago, it was the pride of the neighbourhood. Even the Stansfelds of Thurstane, whose ancient home, with its two strong towers, is famed far and wide, came near

to envying its modish and modern conveniences, and had three-quarters of a mind to exchange dwellings with its owner.

It was empty when Joan was young, though carefully swept and garnished by Mrs Seaton, whose soul yearned for those early days when she and her husband lived there, visibly superior to the rest of Parsifal. Owing to loss of money, and to an inheritance of debt left them by Joan's grandfather, "handsome Miles," they had flitted into the farm-house across the way. Here Mrs Seaton worked, and managed, and regretted the fickleness of fortune, and Anthony, her husband, worked without regret, having somehow tapped an unfathomable holy well of contentment. The road, too, which leads up to the Ridder breaks out half-way, and two tumbling becks insist on room for their rushing swirl in rainy weather before they dive into an ignominious drain at the edge of the street, instead of having their wild way with the village. Between the great house and the mountain road is an enclosed bit of grass land, bordered on the street side by some fine old trees, and containing a queer

medley of ruined masonry, with no picturesque features beyond the crumbling staircase used by Joan's hens as a ladder to their sleeping-place and continually beautified by her snowy pigeons. But the grass and trees are a charming diversion from the grey stone and whitewash on either side. Joan loved the spot, for it exactly fronted her bedroom, and gave her a sense of privacy, and gratified her affection for green-growing things.

Sally Wynne, that compound of mystic and shrewd Yorkshire-wife, pretended to a strange knowledge of the place which she called Bjorn's Garth.

After my return to Parsifal, she adopted me as a crony, not interesting but receptive. On one occasion, she assured me that one winter's night she had seen there, "a tremindjious gurt mon wiv a grizzled hee-ad, an' lapped in a close soort o' sark brass-like, wiv a gurt hat o' steel an trowsies of a varry queer mak' tied aboon t' foot." She spoke to him thinking he was a "fley-be-skite of a playing mon that had lost t' rooad," when she saw the tree "thruff t' small of his back," and knew him for a ghost.

He slowly faded, but not before he had somehow conveyed to her that he was Bjorn, and that he stood upon his ancient garth.

It was through the doorway of the house opposite that Joan disappeared when she left Sally. She sped down the passage, past the front rooms, and waited deep in thought outside the half open kitchen door. The kitchen itself was a place to draw a man's heart back from any of the four quarters of the world. Nothing looked inappropriate, yet there were many articles not usually seen in a farm-house kitchen. In her earlier married life Mrs Seaton had insisted on daily occupying one of the front rooms. But the passage of years and work's weariness had changed her view of the requirements of respectability, and she was satisfied now to sit there on Sunday and on baking-days, when the roar and glow of the great fire made the house-place intolerable.

Being the woman she was, she had impressed herself and her fine taste upon the kitchen. Joan's piano stood between the chimney and the low wide window, whose thin panes, varying

from clear white and faint yellow to grey, gave you a dozen different impressions of the weather. Upon the carved settle on the opposite side cushioned with rich chintz, its panelled back reaching more than half way to the ceiling, lay folded a warm-lined piece of lovely old brocade of the days of spinets and powdered hair. The mahogany cupboard against the right hand wall, with its bevelled glass doors, its shallow drawers and hanging handles of brass, held amongst the ordinary household crockery some choice specimens of Delft and Wedgewood, and two or three complete tea-sets of the true egg-shell china. Though the "best furniture" remained scrupulously polished in a front room, a few odd chairs of exquisite design had strayed down from upstairs, and stood about amongst the massive seats of oak and ash with an air of delicate reserve, giving a finer touch of beauty to the interior. And Mr Seaton's chair had a cushion of red Indian damask, the last bit left by the moths who had claimed the lumber-room when they retreated before Mrs Seaton from the rest of the house. On the window-seat, great

pots of pink geranium and lemon-scented verbenas grew under a hanging garden of mother-of-thousands. A bowl of roses, and another of pinks and lavender, sweetened the air about the old press near the door. This press was dear to the heart of the mistress; it had been part of her grandfather's portion when she left Thurstane, and was a miracle of wood-carving, covered with vine tendrils and grapes, with an occasional leaf from which peered a whimsical creature born of the carver's wild fancy. The first snowdrops, and the last berries of the autumn-lanes crowded its bowls, and Mr Seaton had been known to ride over to Deepdale, where the hollies flourish, indifferent to hard winters, that the scarlet clusters might greet his wife on Christmas morning.

As Joan slowly pushed the door open, the whole place, ruddy, with dancing shadows, seemed to embrace her and give her a living welcome. Home! never before had she understood the word! All the sheltered past, all the unknown but certainly happy future were enfolded in it.

Her father, her mother, her brother Kirster far away; the servants, the very animals of the farm-yard were included in this sudden perception of the heart of home. The earthy specks which marred the ideal were blotted out. As she passed into the kitchen her stimulated consciousness was aware of every detail; she looked upon the scene for the first time as upon a picture, but it was a living picture, of which her dear ones were the priceless centre.

If her outer ears had not been held she would have been conscious of a disturbing element in the home atmosphere. Mrs Seaton was scolding Martha. Martha was the one maid-servant who, with Nat, the farm-man, did all the work not possible to the ready and capable hands of the mistress and her daughter. She was a pretty lass, strongly built and brown-eyed, with hair so fair by nature and through the bleaching of the sun, that the roughened locks on her forehead were tow-coloured, brightening into pale gold where her head kerchief sheltered them. She was a good girl and a proud. Did she not serve

the Seatons for eight pounds a year and a couple of Miss Joan's frocks, which, like most of Miss Joan's gifts, were well worth the receiving. Now the Seatons, if outwardly they were much on a level with their neighbours, had, owing to the magic of tradition, and perhaps to the attitude of Mrs Seaton, a distinct social position of their own. This Martha appreciated to the full, and made unnecessarily clear to the other serving maidens of the hill-side. But at present pride was lost in humiliation.

Mrs Seaton stood by the big oaken table, a slender woman, who missed not a hair's-breadth of her height. Her hands rested on the polished surface, which reflected the brown of her dress, the black of her silk apron, and also a glimmer of red and gold where the cameo brooch caught the ribbon at her throat. Her dark, regular features were flushed, and her lower lip thrust itself forward as she broke in upon Martha's defence of herself.

"Keeping company, and at your time of life — eighteen, is it? How dare you look me in the face?" Martha wrapped her apron round her

arms, her eyes dropped. "Who's to do your work, I should like to know?"

"It won't make me as Ah cannot do my work," the girl faltered. "I'll do my duty by you, Mrs Seaton."

"Don't talk of duty to me when you'll be seeing Nat's head in your pail and coming between you and your work at every turn. However, girls are as thick as mushrooms; and we're not so hard put to it that we can't get one with a better head on her shoulders than yours. There, you can go."

Martha sobbed.

Mrs Seaton took a twist of gilt paper from one of the ornaments on the high mantel shelf and lit a couple of candles standing on the table. There was a rustling movement, and the tall chair before the fire twisted heavily round, dragging up the immense parti-coloured rug which covered the hearth. The master of the house had been awakened from his nap. From under a tumbled mass of white hair his clear blue eyes shone with a large comprehension on the weeper. At the same moment father and daughter spoke.

"Wait a bit, Judith."

"But, mother——"

Two people speaking together make an uncertain sound, but there is an intelligible language without words, and Martha at once understood that a breath of pity had softened the unfriendly air. She appealed to Joan.

"Eh, speeäk up for me, do, Miss Joan. I isn't a bad lass, an' I'm growing older every day. Nat isn't like some on 'em. He disn't go bauboskin' aboot, but sticks at heeäm¹ like t' ould Meäster there."

There was a gleam in the old master's eyes, but his wife angrily rapped the table with her knuckles. "You're not bettering matters," she said, quickly, "putting Mr Seaton on a level with a farm lad!"

Martha caught Joan, who stood near her, by the hand.

"Miss Joan, speeäk up for me, do, honey. Sha's forgotten, but you—it's nat'ral, isn't it? Ivery body gets wed 'ats worth onything, Nat says. Ivery lass likes her lad, an' if he's a

¹heeäm—home.

right soort, he does neäther her nor her work ony hurt." She stopped, breathless, the round tears hopping down her cheeks. Mrs Seaton eyed her in amazed indignation. She opened her mouth for a final dismissal, but Martha began again, desperately.

"Nat, he says to me o' Sunday, when we cum up wiv Mr Humphrey, and you, Miss Joan, 'Eh, lass, you've n' occasion to be flayed. It's as nat'ral as for birds i' pairin' time.'"

Joan made haste to "speeäk up." She wished to end the situation.

"Won't you think it over, mother? Let us sleep on it, and talk about it to-morrow." She came to Mrs Seaton's side and smoothed her collar; "I am sure it will be best."

The elder woman was silent; she was not insensible to the charms of the pleader, but she was keenly alive to the requirements of dignity. She turned away from her daughter, and looked at Martha with unabated wrath. But at this moment Mr Seaton rose slowly to his feet. He was let and hindered by gout—another inheritance from handsome Miles—but pain had

only carved a finer distinction on a notable face. He helped himself up by his wife's shoulder, and kept his hand upon it as he stood. He was a great deep-chested dales-man, every feature of him harmonious, from the massive head to the powerful hand.

"Why, when all's said and done, Judith, it is as she says—natural, poor lass." He lowered his voice; "Didn't we think so once, Judith—thee and me? Don't we now?" his eye sought Joan. Mrs Seaton frowned impatiently, but she held silence. "Well, Martha," he said encouragingly, "let us sleep on it. If you're a good lass, and don't keep that moon-struck lad dancing round you, and spending all his money on ribbons and fal-lals, I daresay it'll all come right."

"Have it your own way, both of you—you always do," Mrs Seaton said stiffly, taking refuge in the usual surprising self-deception of an imperious spirit. She drew her shoulder hastily away from her husband's hand.

But Martha went out heaving a loud sigh of relief, carrying with her the comfort of Miss

Joan's nod and the master's smile. She ran along the street in the opposite direction to her mother's cottage, where she slept, hoping to waylay Nat. Surely he was waiting for her in the shadow of the trees just beyond the village. But as she came nearer, she saw that the dark figure was not her lover, but Rafe Pigot, of Higher Ghyll. He was still standing where Joan had left him, motionless as a heron waiting for his prey.

Later in the evening, Mrs Seaton, having recovered her equanimity, was watching Joan, the shadow of an old dimple in her cheek. Joan was removing the simple supper. As the round rich cheese, the wealth of the dale, and the oven-cake, which is the best bread in the world, with butter of Joan's own making, and a comb of new honey, were being taken to the shelves of the larder, the dimple deepened. And when Joan lifted the last article from the table, a quaint glass decanter, whose silver label cried "Port," but whose amber contents remembered the gooseberry trees at the corner, her mother spoke with an accent of deep content.

"You'll soon have somebody to set your table for you, child. I always grudged to see you doing servant's work." She smoothed the silk stocking she was knitting upon her knee. She scorned woollen stockings, as did her mother before her, just as she scorned cotton sheets, and the use of the dialect when her husband and Joan slipped into the homely speech of the dale. She comforted herself with the recollection of Kirster's unalloyed refinement, and with the hope that Mrs Stansfeld of Thurstane would naturally grow out of provincialisms in spite of Humphrey's praise of North Riding expressions. Mr Seaton pushed away the stool upon which his lame foot rested, and laid his pipe upon the ledge at his side.

"Is it servant's work to wait on her old mother and dad?" he said gently, his eyes following his daughter's figure as she went out into the dairy.

"You know what I mean, Anthony. A Seaton, let alone a Stansfeld, ought to be waited upon;" a spot of red came to her cheek. "I haven't said anything all these years; it would

have been waste of breath, poor as we were. But now that Joan's going to Thurstane, I can surely open my mind a bit. If you forget old times, I don't." She glanced reproachfully at him.

"Perhaps I've the best of it," he answered, slowly. "What can a man want more than his own wife and daughter to wait on him? I'm fond enough to think their ways the finest in the world—as their bread is the best. Have I been selfish, Judith?" He leaned back against the carved dolphins which crowned his chair, and watched his wife tenderly through his half-closed eyes.

A flash of pink lit up the passage. Joan came in, drawing down her sleeves over her pretty arms.

"I heard you," she said, shaking her head at Mrs Seaton. She knelt between them, taking a hand of each.

"You won't be vexed with me, dear, but I think father's right. I suppose we haven't proper feelings, you and I, daddy. I'm sure we are poor degenerate things, both of us; we

must be." There was a loving raillery in her voice. "I haven't Stansfeld enough in me, and you haven't any at all. Here we are, both of us, wishing there were no servants. I think mother's wonderful to put up with us,—but—one of us will soon be gone!"

Her heart's emotion overcame her; she drew close to the elder woman and laid her bright head on her knee—her voice thrilled and broke.

"O mother, I wish I could wait on Humphrey, and do for him as I've done for you. I am strong and young, and there are so few ways to show love in."

Her father bent down and stroked her hair with his great hand. There was a deep silence—the husband and wife looked at each other across the beautiful figure on the rug. For that moment, at least, Mrs Seaton forgot her wrongs at the hands of fortune.

CHAPTER III

THE POSY-RING

ON one memorable occasion, four years ago, a week before Kirster went to India, Joan had won three hearts of an afternoon.

She had gone with Kirster and Humphrey to Aikden fair in Deepdale. Jane Caley and Ralph Pigot were also of the party; Agatha, Humphrey's sister, had refused to come. They returned in the evening by the high bleak Pass between the two dales, full of talk of the fair and the friends they had met. Kirster drove, and his two three-year-olds were as unequally matched in character as in colour. The grey was steady from his birth, but the roan mare had a fine imagination, which invented danger at every turn of the road. It was years since any of the party had been over the Pass, but Kirster knew that it was a regular track for pack-horses, and that carts came over it con-

stantly. The young men assured themselves that the sobriety of the grey would curb his companion's restlessness, and the presence of Kirster was of itself a protection to the timorous.

All went well within and without the old double phaeton until about a hundred and fifty yards from the summit. The road narrowed and steepened under the overhanging rocks to the right; and the mare, catching sight of the precipitous drop to the valley below her, tried to back, and was only kept steady by Humphrey, who, jumping down, caught her head and encouraged her with hand and voice. Another fifty yards and both horses were trembling. Ralph, on the inside of the track, was re-assuring the grey. The girls clung to each other in the back seat.

Not one of them was ignorant of the danger of the moment, nor of the greater danger ahead. The still narrowing and ascending road curved sharply beyond and seemed to end in space. Was it possible to drive on?

If the excitement of the animals increased, if the phaeton gave back a couple of feet, the whole party would be dashed into the dim gorge

beneath. Kirster sat forward, his whole soul bent on restraining the pace without putting too decided a check on the horses. On either side ran the other men, Humphrey with little more than a foot between himself and the brink, and knowing it. His face was like a flint, but Rafe's reckless spirit glittered in his eyes as they neared the turning. The runners looked round anxiously at the girls. Joan, very upright, clutched the side of the phaeton with one hand, and with the other pressed Jane's head to her shoulder. Jane clung to her friend, her sweet eyes dark with the shadow of approaching death, and was held the closer as the old vehicle swayed below the curve of the hill.

"That," said Ralph to himself, still looking back at Joan, "is the girl for me," and even as the wheels swept round the point and rushed down the gentler gradient beyond, he swore a wild oath that he would have her. Jane, sustained by Joan in what had been as the valley of death to her, and remembering certain words of pity and encouragement which had fallen from her friend's mouth at the very crisis of

the adventure, gave her a girlish worship from that moment.

And Humphrey, now Joan's lover, dated the quickening of his heart from the hour in which he had seen her sitting there, so young, so steadfast, the underlying gentleness of her nature breaking forth at the clinging touch of the timid creature beside her.

He was standing by the churn in her dairy a week after Martha's reprieve. It was not yet eight o'clock, and the place smelt like a posy in the morning air.

There were two wide-mouthed tubs on the floor full of curd, smooth as polished ivory, as indeed there were at this hour on every dairy floor in Parsifal. The rennet had done its work ; and Joan was preparing to break up the contents. On the spotless wooden shelf running round the walls lay a dozen long sprays of a yellow climbing rose, loose-petalled, and of an exquisite perfume, such as old roses breathed before science took to improving them.

The dairy opened upon a flagged passage leading to the yard and the garden ; and before

its window lay the width of the dale, golden-green in the mellow sunshine, topped by a pink flush of heather on Thurstane Scar. One had but to put one's head out to see Thurstane itself half encircled by its trees.

The man talking to Joan, well-knit and very upright, was so like Mrs Seaton and her family that his name was never a matter for guesswork. He was a black Stansfeld of the best type, proud-featured, and of a brown clearness of complexion. His dress was that of a well-to-do farmer of the middle of the century. You may find it to-day, but slightly altered, on the backs of old men at Fors ; and you would have found it everywhere when Waterloo was fought. It is a picturesque attire, and puts our modern dress to shame. If a man had any figure to speak of, it made the most of him ; and if he had none, it put a shape upon him.

Humphrey was not the worse looking that he wore a crimson waistcoat beneath the brown coat, with its great square pockets, in itself a fine contrast to his tan-coloured riding-breeches and gaiters. At this moment there was no sign

of the white horseshoe which I have seen on his forehead in times of excitement or anger, and which rose first on the brow of Captain Thomas at Agincourt, when in furious onset he fell upon a great lord of France and clave him through helmet and head down to his mail-clad body.

Joan had begun to break up the curd with a coarse wire sieve, and he was thinking, not for the first time, that the living white of the human skin has an advantage, from the point of beauty, over the richest milk from the best pastures in the dales.

"Still you oughtn't to break off so many," she was saying reprovingly ; "you should cut a rose, not break it. Look at those shreds and slivers of stem ! I was only thinking last week that if we left it to itself, and pruned it properly, it would climb over the chamber-royal window."

"So it shall. Why, God love you, it makes nearer a yard than an inch every year."

"Humphrey !" She rested her elbows on the sides of the tub, in which the whey was now rising above the curd, and looked up at him gravely. "You promised you wouldn't say

that again. It gives me such a turn ; it's a kind of swearing, I'm sure."

"Swearing, Joan! I mean it, every word, it's the bare wish of my heart. It's about the best thing I do say ; and what's more, I've thought it and wished it day and night these four years."

Joan gave him a lightning-quick glance of sweetness, and turned hastily to her work again.

"Much you know of swearing," he continued, watching the busy hands, which were ladling out the whey, and which were kept unusually fair owing to the pride of Mrs Seaton, who made such a point of Joan's washing them in buttermilk that the girl obeyed rather than grieve her mother. Well-kept hands were to Mrs Seaton one of the distinguishing points of that ladyhood which she had made such heroic efforts to preserve. "If you were to hear Rafe Pigot coming back from market," said Humphrey, "or any day, for the matter of that—he fairly blackens the grass when his temper is up. He hasn't been the same lad since he spent that year with his uncle in Mexico. Off like a catherine-wheel he is,

sputter and crackle, if you look at him! He brought some queer ways back with him, as well as that lasso thing he is always playing with."

Joan apparently was lost in her cheese-making. She filled the cheese-mould with the strained curd and stooped to lift it into the press. Humphrey, however, forestalled her, and swung it lightly into its place. As he did so he threw his head back with a laugh.

"Talking of Rafe, he was like a man that had stumbled into a bee-bike when I came across him after seeing him with you on the wood-top yesterday week. What had you said to him, love?"

She was now washing her hands in the pantry beyond, but came out hurriedly and stood on the step outside, the towel in her hands.

"It's dreadfully hot," she said, wearily, "let us go into the garden."

He followed, conscious of some change in her. They stood together in the flagged passage without speaking. Then he put his hand within her arm and led her down the yard into the broad sunshine. As they went she trod upon a decay-

ing leaf and slipped. His arm was about her in an instant ; she came close to him, an unusual action with her, for she was shy of love's demonstrations. At the top of the steep garden—her garden—where all her fancies bloomed in herbs and flowers, was a great water-butt, its sides deep in ruby-hued nasturtiums. On the edge of this Humphrey half sat, half leaned, holding her in front of him. This brought the two pairs of eyes on a level, and the blood leapt to the girl's cheeks under his loving scrutiny.

She replied to his unspoken question by a question of her own.

“Do you like Rafe, Humphrey?”

There was a momentary lift of the level eyebrows, but he answered readily,

“Nay, there's not much liking in it. We have been chums all our lives, and I suppose we are so still. Since he came back you never know where to have him, that's the worst of him. He's had a bad sort of bringing up under old Marmaduke. If his mother had lived things would have been different. I have a recollection of her lying upstairs on her bed, a tired face,

but as patient as a lamb. Rafe shows his good sense, too, in this,—he has a vast admiration for my sweetheart, an owl could see that, and for that I'd do him a good turn any day."

"Would he do you one?" She nervously twisted a button on his coat, and the music of her voice deepened.

The young man laughed carelessly; he beat her hands lightly together.

"I wouldn't stake a cast shoe on that. He's a queer customer just now, but nobody, my dear lass, has any occasion to be afraid of Ralph Pigot. He's a better sort of wastrel, I take it, hops from one thing to another. What! you're not afraid of him? Take no notice of his talk in his black moods! The day after he's like a child, singing on the road like a bird; and his worst enemy can't deny that he sings well. But let us put him out of our heads. Will *you* do me a good turn, Joan?"

He brought out something from his pocket, a little morocco case covered with a tarnished filigree of silver, and put it into her hand, closing

her fingers upon it and holding all in his strong clasp.

"Guess what I want, and you shall have the box."

Joan put aside her anxiety with an effort.

"What is it? I don't think I knew what a plague you could be, Humphrey."

"Guess, guess!" he said, resisting her effort to free herself.

"To make that cheese mother disapproves of, so that you can steal a march on her?"

"It's a grand idea, but—no!"

"To promise to knit all your stockings," she said, with a grimace

"No."

"To ride over to Fors with you to-morrow to protect you from Mrs Dan Stansfeld?"

"No, not even that. It's something about our future, Joan; but there, you shall have the box. I know the good heart in you won't refuse."

He had intended to speak of their marriage, which he hoped would take place before Christmas, but something within him warned him to wait.

Joan opened the curious lid and took out a very old jewel—a dove of worked gold, holding in its beak a heart of amethyst pierced by an arrow-pin of silver, and a posy-ring set with two rows of small pearls. For all her independent ways Joan was but a girl, and had a girl's eye for pretty things.

"O, how bonnie!" she cried, "and for me, both of them?"

"I should just think they are, and a lot more as well. They are both old, but they have been worn by those we need never be ashamed of. And the ring, love, was given by my father to my mother on their wedding-day. There are finer in the oak chest, but I thought these would please you best, Joan!"

Joan was reading the posy—" *But one for me, but one for thee, but one of thee and me.*"

Humphrey looked doubtfully at her. He was not sure that this bringing of the ring was a wise policy.

"She might take fright and back away from me," he explained to Agatha the evening before, as they sat together on the old chest, the ring

poised on his thumb. "She isn't one to stand pulling. Love her well, and let her come, and she comes—bless her!"

As she stood before him she was so lovely and desirable, and represented so much of what was deepest and best in him, that he dreaded with a real fear to startle or annoy her. In Joan the Stansfeld was perfected by the Seaton. She had her father's broader brow and shorter nose, and her head, with its waving hair, had, like his, a kind of sculptured nobility. She had read the words, and was looking out over Thurstane Scar, thoughtful and silent. In her attitude there was something of the pose of the earlier Greek statues, the unconscious simplicity and the ideal proportions. To Humphrey she had never seemed so beautiful. She remained so long wrapped in her reflections that he was convinced that his fears had been justified. He was beginning to speak to her when a man galloped down the street and stopped at the Seatons' gate. In the space between the houses Humphrey saw and recognised the rider.

"Why, here's Rafe!" he exclaimed.

Joan turned sharply. Whatever her feelings may have been on reading the posy, she immediately stretched out her hand to him with a touching gesture of trust — her eyelashes glistened.

"But one for me," she said, so low that he but barely heard her; "put it on, Humphrey."

As he slipped it over her finger, bending down his head to hide his great and surprised gladness, she kissed him softly on the forehead.

"And now, go," she said, with a little trembling laugh, pushing him gently away. "No, not that way, but down through the stile."

She wanted to meet Rafe alone, fearing lest in one of these black moods some look or word of his might rouse the indignation which slumbered lightly in a Stansfeld. It must be her mission to keep a perfect peace between the two men.

"Go, dear, do;" she urged Humphrey down the path, and reminded him of the other cheese which still had to be made, and his hay still to be carried in the field over the river.

At the stile she stooped to pluck a white clove

pink from the border. A tender regret fell over her like a veil.

"What will my garden do when I am gone?" she said. "Mother cares nothing for growing flowers, she only wants a bit of colour and a sweet smell in the house. Where will my love-in-a-mist be, and who will sow my lupins and my stocks?"

"Joan, Joan," came from the yard.

"There's your mother calling, I must bid her good-day." Humphrey would have retraced his steps, but she planted herself in the path.

"No, no," she insisted, giving him the pink, "come again to-night. See, this will set off your red waistcoat grandly. Now go, Vanity, go."

Before he could protest she was half-way up the hill, flying like a bird, a couple of terriers brought down by Nat from the reclaimed grasslands on the Ridder rushing down to her in a clamour of joyful barks.

Mrs Seaton met her in the passage. "Rafe Pigot's just going; don't waste time with him, it's getting late, and there's that second cheese waiting. He's at the gate."

Ralph was already on horseback. If Joan's eyes had not been full of the figure just getting over the wall of Heseltine's field she would have admired the easy grace of the man before her. What pleased her more than his appearance was his cheerful smile. Evidently the duel of the week before was forgotten. She wished Humphrey had stayed.

"Don't go, Rafe, without a rose. There's a beauty;" she pointed to the wreaths above the window.

He laughed. "I've got my rose," he said, and touched a yellow cluster in his button-hole.

Joan reddened. There was no mistaking the loose petals, they were Thurstane roses.

"Have you stolen them from the dairy?" she asked, incredulously.

"That's just about it, Joan. Humphrey gathers and—*I wear.*" He made a distinct pause before the last two words. "Do you see?"

He hummed a light air indifferently.

Her spirit staggered for an instant, but pride supported her.

"There are some people who like stolen sweets best," she said coldly, "as I take it, they're welcome. It's not my way and it's not Humphrey's."

Ralph gave no sign of hearing her, his attention appeared to be rivetted on the flash and play of her features. But as he ambled away he removed the roses from his coat, and, looking full in her indignant eyes with a peculiar smile, pressed them to his lips.

"O mother!" she cried, running into the dairy, where Mrs Seaton was skimming a pan of milk, "I hate Rafe, I really do. I can't help it."

The mother smiled at the flushed face. "I'll warrant he's been teasing you, child. Trust a Pigot for that. But you can stand up for yourself, or you're not my daughter."

"But I do believe he's jealous of Humphrey," Joan faltered, a little shamefaced.

"I shouldn't wonder," answered Mrs Seaton, still smiling; "his father was jealous of yours; maybe it runs in the family. It won't hurt you, and it won't hurt Humphrey. My patience! if

a Stansfeld's not a match for a Pigot, it's a pity. There, love, get that cheese done. As for Rafe, if all I hear is true, he'll be going afoot before he dies unless he alters; in spite of Marmaduke Pigot's big farm and the money he's scraped from every stone."

Humphrey, however, saw the roses before the day was out.

On his way home, in the direction of the "hipping-stanes" which ford the river, he met Sally Wynne. She was coming from the low copses by the water-side, with a market basket full of herbs for the making of her simples and harvest-drinks.

She had nursed Humphrey and Agatha as well as Kirster and Joan for the first feeble months of life, and used a comfortable freedom of speech to them.

"It's easy to tell where you've comed fra. Ah've kenned those pinks gettin' on for a lifetime. But there's bad wark doon there," she jerked her thumb backwards. "You'd best speeäk wiv ould Heseltine afore you cross t' river. Theers terrable gannins on, and he looks

a bad look. He tumm'led fra t' stee¹ o' Setterday, an' he's noan fit for sike wark. He fell wiv his leg o' t' scythe, an' his shouther hings for deeäd-like."

"What are all those folks doing down there, Sally?"

Her eye twinkled. "Ah deeänt reetly ken, it's summat about t' beck. Best gan an' see," she said laconically, and took up her basket.

He climbed over the wall. There was no doubt about the old farmer's bad look. He was a man of sixty, spare and muscular, his light hair streaked with grey. The sun-scorched skin had a queer dull tint; and his blazing eyes were hollow under the yellow bushes of his eye-brows. There was a patch of blood on the stubble at his feet, and one grey stocking was soaked and dark. His right arm hung in a rough sling. He stood with his men about him by the side of a newly-dug trench. On the other side of it were a couple of labourers with spades and mattocks. In the ditch lay a fat, bald-headed man groaning, and sputtering

¹stee—ladder.

out threats. Humphrey, panting from his run, made the best of his way to the old man's side.

"Why, what's all this, Mr Heseltine? What's that dike for?" he shouted.

"Dike, ay, it's a dike, sure enough! It's filled now," he added, grimly. If he graves it again, I'll fill it again, and in t' same way. Thoo knaws I bought t' land from Dan Stansfeld a fortnight since, hay and all. And Jack Wynne there, he's terrable mad aboot it, he thowt of having it himself. So he graved that to carry my water off from t' beck. This is t' second time he's done it, but it's t' last. Thowt I was a-bed with my bit of a hurt, but I caught him! There he ligs with his sauce and his blather. He went in at t' first push too!" he said, contemptuously. He emphasised his words by a passionate shake of his left hand in the direction of his enemy, who had now clambered painfully out of the ditch.

"I'll be even wi' thee yet, Bill Heseltine!" the fat man screamed furiously. He burst into a string of foul oaths, which so enraged the old

farmer that, but for Humphrey's grip upon him, he would have tried to leap the gap in spite of his bleeding leg.

"I'll settle him," the young man cried, indignant at the foul play and the vile language. "Here, get out of this!" He took the man by the collar, and the two labourers made for the nearest stile. There was a fierce, short struggle, the sound of horse's hoofs, and Ralph Pigot dropped over the high gate in time to give a parting shove to the heavy body which Humphrey rolled over the wall.

"I hope his bones are not broken," said the latter, wiping his forehead.

"Pah!" rejoined Ralph, "you can't break the bones of a meal-sack." And they left the man still swearing among the docks and nettles of the lane.

The old farmer refused to go home in spite of his wound and dislocated shoulder. He refused also to send for the Yorely doctor.

"What!" he said, "that bessy-babs! That lile chap! I've stood it two days; an' I can bide other two till Spenning comes on his rounds

from Fors. He's a far-leärnt man, and a goodish age; none of your lolloping lads with their fond notions!" He was trembling with pain and excitement, but he sat stiffly upright on a cock of hay, his neck-cloth round his injured leg.

The young men left him at last, his teeth set hard, inheritor of the ancient stoicism of the Northmen.

But before the time of the afternoon "drinkings," Dr Spenning himself, fetched by Humphrey, had got the stoic laid upon his bed, the shoulder set, and the wounded leg given into the care of Sally Wynne, of whose skill he often availed himself, even to using some of her ointments. He did this the more readily in that she was outside the circle of professional competition.

As Ralph mounted his horse, Humphrey caught sight of the roses.

"I didn't know you grew my roses at Higher Ghyll," he said pleasantly. A dark crimson shot over the other's face.

"You can call them yours if you like," he

answered hostilely. "It's the wearing of them I care for." He struck his horse so violently that it shied and tried to unseat him. But Ralph was dale-born, and in another instant had galloped past Humphrey down the lane, leaving the latter to shrug his shoulders and try to remember such facts in the history of the Pigots as might give colour to a theory of madness

CHAPTER IV

MRS SEATON'S PLANS

AFTER Ralph's departure, Mrs Seaton went up to her jam cupboard. The quaintly-panelled door opened immediately to the right of the staircase on the landing, and its cavernous key-hole held just then a gigantic key, suitable to the postern of a fortress, which usually lay hidden away under her best lace collars.

She was unaffectedly proud of her jams, but now she regarded a pot of last year's plums with critical disapprobation.

"All of a candy," she said, "as I'm a living woman! That Caley recipe never keeps! I always said it didn't. There's generally something lacking or over in other people's things! I'll stick to my own in the future. Why, if that isn't Kirster's elephant. How did I come to use it again?"

She took it up, a china animal, which held in

a cavity in the back a load of currant jelly, and stroked its glazed head. A soft dimness gathered in her eyes. The early breakfast over, she was not yet needed in the kitchen, she would stay awhile on the cool landing and let herself drift back into her boy's childhood.

"To think he should have made so much of it once, and now he's seeing live ones every day of his life I shouldn't wonder. I remember its trunk got that crack when the lads fought for it in the barn." Her voice was scarcely audible; she was far away in the past.

"Mercy! what a time I had that day!"

The two boys stood again before her, Kirster flushed and eager, even then tall and broad-shouldered, and Humphrey, pale and slender, with a sparkle of light in his angry eyes, clamouring for her judgment. Behind them a little figure directed appealing glances to her.

"Yes, Agatha was always for Kirster! If he had said Yes was No, No it would have been. There weren't two such bonnie lads far or near, and Agatha and baby Joan"—a shadow rested on her face, she drew her brows together after

the fashion of her kin, a constant trick of hers when agitated or displeased. To explain Mrs Seaton's frown we must take a glance backward.

When Kirster was twenty-two, four years ago, he too had been all for Agatha, to his mother's intense chagrin. It was one thing to give Joan to the heir of Thurstane and the head of her own idolised family, and quite another to accept his sister with her home-breeding and modest portion as her son's wife. For Kirster Mrs Seaton had chosen another bride, the daughter and heiress of John Howden of Scale. She was pretty enough to look at, her money would restore the glories of Parsifal Head, and she had no disadvantage to speak of. Any man worth calling a man could be master of his own house, or his wife's, for that matter, even if she had a temper of her own. But Kirster was so much of a man that he declined to make the experiment, even though Emily Howden could cover "the chapel-garth wi' gowd" as her father once boasted at the "Crown" at Hornaby. And he showed a growing inclination to stray over the river and up the fields to Thurstane.

Parsifal, unique in many respects, was unique in this, that it had a creed of its own, called throughout the dale "the old Parsifal religion," a peculiarly inflexible form of Calvinism. To be christened, married, or buried, the inhabitants went down to Yorely, to Mr Frystone and the parish church. But Sunday by Sunday they entered the little chapel at the end of the village street, built and endowed by an enthusiastic believer in predestination; and listened with much satisfaction to Mr Metcalfe's inexorable exposition of the five points of Calvinism. His preaching excluded the greater portion of mankind from salvation, but in practice his loving soul included the whole company of the heterodox in the uncovenanted mercies of God. It was Mr Metcalfe who said that the Stansfelds had "the vision." By this he did not mean that they were seers of ghosts or revealers of things to come; but that they had an unusual clearness of sight in matters of right and wrong. The dale dwellers themselves say that "the Stansfelds see a deeäl further than the meeäst on us," and they derive some satis-

faction from the fact, feeling that Providence will judge the rest of the world, meaning themselves, more leniently on account of its native blindness. "The vision" brought both joy and sorrow to the family who possessed it. In obedience to it certain members, at the cost of wealth, friends, even of life itself, had done great things in fulfilment of it; and in spite of it certain others had pursued an easier path, with doubtful comfort to themselves, as the vision haunted them to the end.

To Mrs Seaton it had been a frequent thorn in the flesh, and a very special trial at the time of her disappointment with Kirster.

She had oftentimes reflected upon the awkwardness of life. "The vision" perpetually revealed a path which turned off at right angles from all that to her mind made for success and advancement. A sensible woman could do no other than close her eyes to the revelation, and let her natural instinct make the most of circumstances.

"This world wasn't made for angels," she remarked to Mr Metcalfe.

And yet there were wakeful moments in the night-time when her mind rested with relief upon the fact that however she might fail of the ideal, her husband remained untouched by the argument that the other world's maxims were—owing to the present unfortunate conditions—inapplicable to this world. Again and again, in the tiresome clashing of two interests; and after the decision which obvious common-sense obliged her to take, she had, as it were, drawn around her the mantle of his simple rectitude and faith, and felt herself protected from any darts which a morbid conscience might cast.

In her heart of hearts, notwithstanding the annoyance to which at times it gave rise, she valued his moral stature as much as her girlish affection had rejoiced in the nobility of his carriage and the height and strength of his bodily frame. However good he might be, she was his wife, and therefore practically himself.

But there were a hundred matters which she did not share with him. It was better indeed not to trouble him—he couldn't understand. She had said nothing to him, therefore, of her

difficulty with Kirster. There was only one way of bringing her son to reason: yet the taking of it involved a misgiving which still haunted her, though years had passed.

Kirster himself was beyond management; with much of his father's genial sweetness, he had the Stansfeld independence, and a determination of his own. Her hope lay in Agatha's sensitive pride; and a day came when, her plans complete, she took her way to Thurstane.

The vivid blossoms of the pyrus-japonica broke out upon the hoary walls and around the exquisite windows of the great hall which connected the larger tower with the smaller. And Agatha sat singing in the porch, her lap full of primroses.

Something in the girl's unconscious face smote the elder woman. She called to her so sharply and impatiently that the flowers fell in a fragrant heap to the ground, and Agatha hurried, breathless, to meet her.

In feature and stature the two resembled each other, but in character there was little likeness. There was a certain delicate refinement in the

figure and movements of both, and the same touch of reserve. But Mrs Seaton had little sympathy with the shy ways and studious tastes of her young cousin.

She had done her best for her, as she frequently said to Joan, who playfully accused her mother of misjudging Agatha. She had considered her as her special charge ever since the winter's day when Christopher Stansfeld laid his wife in the dark vault at Danbrigg and begged her to help him with the up-bringing of his children.

That Thurstane was so well kept, and that Agatha's butter and cheese were profitable and excellent, was to Mrs Seaton simply another proof that she herself was unusually fitted for life's affairs, not merely her own, but those of others.

The spring sun was warm, and the walk through the fields steep. It was not until she had had a cup of tea and a piece of new saffron cake, sprinkled with crystals of sugar-candy, that she opened the subject of her visit.

She went up with Agatha into the great

black-raftered room in the tower, where the best cheeses were kept. There were several of the newly-imported Stilton shape, which she severely disapproved of, and refused to make. Leaving her companion to turn them over, she passed through the stone archway into the little chamber-royal, where Mary of Scotland had slept on her way from Scropely; and where ill-regulated persons still saw her from time to time sitting at the window busy with her rosary, her mysterious eyes fixed upon the intruder. It was a place sacred to the children of many generations; and Kirster had sat upon the floor through whole afternoons whittling his boats and making his flies; whilst Agatha invented new romances of old days.

The delicious dread of suddenly meeting those inscrutable eyes never lost its power until the schools at York, after a half-year's training, sent back to the dale a Kirster and Humphrey who despised "ghosts," and an Agatha who felt it her duty to despise them.

Half-leaning out of the window, and occasionally smelling the leaves of flowering currant

which she had crushed in her palm, Mrs Seaton spoke, raising her voice a little.

She talked of Kirster, or *Christopher*, as she chose to call him on solemn occasions, in a tranquil, meditative way; as if she knew that her own mind and that of his old playfellow would be at one with regard to him.

"You won't be surprised, I know. Christopher's sure to have confided in you. He's often at Scale now, and has got pretty far in Emily's good graces. We shall be hearing news, I daresay, in a week or two! You have always been such friends, just like brother and sister. I have said so scores of times. Old John won't object; he has money, but no manners, and she's a pretty girl, but quick-tempered. Nobody's too good a match for Christopher. He takes after me in liking refinement, and——"

She was getting confused. There were no comments from the other room; she stopped speaking. But Agatha now came through the doorway, and Mrs Seaton, to hide a certain awkwardness, met her with one of her rare kisses. She was conscious of a touch of compunction,

for the girl's face was shocked and suffering, and she shivered as she stood by the window.

"It's chilly yet when the sun goes down," Mrs Seaton said kindly, "let us go and sit by the fire a bit."

She was truly sorry to be the means of hurting one for whom she had an affection ; but yet more truly glad that her mission was accomplished. She knew the Stansfeld nature, and if Kirster could be kept from Thurstane for a week or two, all would be well. There was Denis Heseltine, a good lad, and fond of Agatha, or soon would be, with the least encouragement. His father could put down a shilling for most other people's sixpences. Agatha couldn't stand roughing it.

A mere hint of Denis would have an effect on Kirster, strengthened as it was sure to be by Agatha's new reserve. On her way back she turned at the last gate for another look at the house of her forefathers. Tears of pride sprang to her eyes. More than ever was she determined to propitiate Providence, that her children's children might dwell beneath the old roof-tree

and call it home. By the time she had reached the middle of the bridge, under which the river was running red in the sunset, the sight of Agatha, white and motionless amongst the fallen primroses, had passed from her mind.

She was seeing Parsifal Head renovated and re-opened with John Howden's money.

All this and much more she remembered as she stood with the china elephant in her hand. Much of what she had wished had happened. Kirster and Agatha had drifted apart; and if he had rejected Emily Howden and had gone to the other ends of the earth out of her sight and care, he was now Captain Seaton, sure to marry some woman, not only of wealth but of position, whose shoes John Howden's daughter was not worthy to brush.

When old Lord Coverly, the friend of handsome Miles, had offered Kirster a commission, she almost forgave that gay ancestor his inroads upon the family property. To part with her son cost her an agony; but to procure his welfare, as she counted welfare, she would cheerfully have died.

Kirster changed sadly in the few months that elapsed before his departure. His sunny spirit passed into a cloud, and his mother was not taken into his confidence until the last evening, when she walked with him for the last time through the hanging wood. The heart sorrow with which he spoke of Agatha's coldness to him scarcely compensated Mrs Seaton for the trouble she had taken to disappoint him. There was too much evidence in his face, and in his tone, that as yet there was no wavering of his love.

She had difficulties, too, with her husband and with Humphrey, awkward questions to meet, and surmise to baffle. Agatha never came to Parsifal when Kirster was there, and Kirster crossed the river no more until he said "Good-bye."

This trying season was now long past; it was time to bury it and forget.

She let the sunshine of success banish these old recollections. Kirster's promotion, shortly after the breaking out of the mutiny, and his passing through its horrors as yet unscathed: Joan's engagement, the easier circumstances of

the last few years, all united in giving her a sense of victory and good fortune. She began to calculate how many pots of crab-jelly could be spared for the new housekeeping at Thurstane, which Humphrey was eager to begin before Christmas. His father's last wish had been that his boy should not marry until the last mortgage was paid off. In November the final payment would be made, and after that would come the wedding—if Joan permitted.

"Ten—twelve," muttered Mrs Seaton. There came a loud exclamation of fright through the guest-chamber door. She hastened to look out of the window. Martha had turned the grass-plot into a lawn of snow by spreading Joan's new table-cloths there to bleach. She was now bending over a small black object on the gravel path. "Eh, dear! eh, dear!" she cried.

"What are you doing there?" asked Mrs Seaton, briskly.

"It's a mouldiwar¹,¹ for sure it is! It's varry onlucky to see one so far fra heeäm.² Sally tellt me so."

¹ mouldiwarp—mole.

² heeäm—home.

"Sally!" ejaculated her mistress, impatiently. "She is nothing but a mole herself! If your mind were on your work there wouldn't be room for such whimsies. Go in at once."

"I was afeared o' some hurt to Nat, or to Mr Humphrey," Martha added quickly, remembering the scene of last week. "When mouldi-warps dee at your door they mostly cooms wi' heavy news. Sally isn't t' only one 'at says so."

But the face at the window had vanished. Mrs Seaton had no time to listen to the follies of a stupid old woman and a feather-brained hand-maiden. Martha, fearful of consequences, applied herself with unusual diligence to the scrubbing of the dairy floor, making calculations as to how many mouldiwarp skins it would take to make Nat a waistcoat for his wear in winter.

"It's a deeäl handsomer nor plush," she reflected.

When Mrs Seaton reached the kitchen she found Mr Metcalfe, usually called *Passon* Metcalfe, sitting with her husband. He was a thin man of medium height and middle age, with an intellectual head and a rather sad countenance.

His eye gave one the impression of looking away and beyond his present surroundings. The men far and near respected him for his life ; the women, old and young, loved him and pitied him.

It was something more than the gentleness of his manners that endeared him to them. There was an idea, amounting to a conviction in the dale, that he had had a disappointment in love. The slight melancholy, which exhaled from him like an aroma, was to the feminine mind an undeniable proof of it.

Mrs Seaton had an especial affection for him, and as far as Sally his housekeeper would let her, looked after his creature comforts.

She never resented his comments upon her frank contempt for the world at large ; nor did she allow his teachings with regard to faith and conduct, to disturb her unduly when her own intentions ran counter to it. For her he was Anthony's friend : a man deprived of that chiefest blessing, a wife, and one who had drunk deeply of sorrow.

She greeted him with warmth.

"I was telling him," said Mr Seaton, leaning

his arms upon the great ledger before him, "that Kirster couldn't do better than come home and settle down with Agatha."

"And I quite agree with him, Mrs Seaton." The danger-spot came up into her cheek.

"They were sweethearts when they were children; and she is vastly sweeter and better than any fine madam he meets out there," said the master of the house, with his genial smile.

"I don't agree with you," she answered, so coldly that both men looked at her with surprise. "Kirster will need to look for somebody rather higher than a farmer's daughter. If you have no proper pride, Anthony, you may be sure he has."

The sight of the good minister had reminded her of a new remedy she had heard of for bronchitis; but this unexpected onslaught robbed her of so much of her dignity, that, to preserve the remnants, she caught up a pile of stockings from the press and slowly walked out of the house-place, holding her head very erect.

CHAPTER V

THE PASSON'S PERPLEXITY

SALLY WYNNE might be termed the figure-head of Parsifal. She typified its shrewd wisdom, its prejudices, and its superstitions. It was she who brought the young into the world, and whose reverent hands shrouded the dead. She was surgeon and physician to the poor; and even the well-to-do people, who from social reasons thought it proper to consult Dr Spenning, left his physic in the cupboard and used Sally's draughts and salves.

She lived with her eldest brother for five-and-forty years in a whitewashed cottage on the flank of the Ridder, in the midst of the rolling heather, tending her bees and ministering to Parsifal.

Kransu too, her dog, and some said her familiar, lived upon the moorland, where at this time the honeyed air blowing softly from the south, caressed him with a touch of velvet. Like

the Seatons, he had a position of his own, but, unlike them, it was that of a foreign despot.

Five years ago her nephew David had brought him to her wrapped in his pea-jacket, a sharp-nosed roll of yellow fluff with pointed ears. The moon and the planets approving, Sally accepted the gift, and made the most of it.

There were dogs of all kinds in Parsifal, but one and all did obeisance to the usurper. He was no bigger than a small collie ; but he had a deep chest that saved him in a fight, and a curved wolf's fang, the mere baring of which set a strange beggar at the run, and kept his hungry acquaintances at an honest distance from his bone ; if he preferred his doze to his dinner.

David bought him for a dollar and a jack-knife from a wandering Lapp in Helsingfors for the sake of his deep white chest and his tawny eye, keen as a merlin's, of the colour of his back. Also, because he believed him to be a wolf.

He was strongly reserved in manner, and he did exactly as he chose. Go to heel he never would, though the best dog-fanciers in the

neighbourhood had had a turn at the training of him. He was not generally loved, but the world respected him ; and to the favoured half-dozen whom he honoured by his friendship he was dear after the fashion of a human being, not of a dog.

His mistress said he could die of a broken heart sooner than any Christian she knew of. And it is true that for two months after his arrival in a strange land he moaned and wept until Sally wept too. Twice, up to the date of this story, he had licked a friendly hand, once on Sally's return from her brother's funeral, and once when Humphrey took a splinter out of his pad. When work was done, and the knitting was taken out of the blue jug on the dresser, Kransu would sit at the wise woman's feet, leaning his head against her in a mute caress.

After her brother's death, Sally, who had watched Passon Metcalfe's ministrations to him with undemonstrative gratitude, suddenly appeared on a January evening at the bare stone house, which some one had built on a

lonely plot at the eastern end of the village, and whose only attraction was its outlook.

"Anna's gone, Passon, and you've neäther barn nor woman i' t' hoose," she said abruptly to the astonished minister, who sat by the study table and his untasted supper.

"I am alone for the present, Sally,—but ——" Kransu suddenly appeared, wagging his wolf's tail. Sally closed the outer door, set a huge bundle down upon a chair, then she faced round.

"Ah've heerd theer's a kirk in ivery mon's breast, but there's neeäther a kitchen nor yet a cook! What soort of eatin' is that for an agein' mon, an' one that's got to spin two sermons a week oot o' his heeäd? Ah've cum to stay." And she stayed; so did Kransu.

As far as creeds went, she was a frank pagan. She had her own test of man and woman. When she heard of John Howden's death, she observed to Kransu, in her master's hearing—

"So he's deeäd, is he? He'll be fair stag-

nated to find hisself dropping doon into t' flaämes; he'll happen see things a bit different when he's getten into t' bad plaäce."

Mr Howden had been a pillar of the old Parsifal religion for thirty years, and surprisingly sure of his election. But his hand had been heavy on the widow and the fatherless, and the tender spirit of his wife had sunk under his chill severity. That he had left money to Yorely Church for a new peal of bells had not softened Sally's judgment.

"He clutched t' brass tiv t' end," she observed, laconically, to Mrs Caley, who told her the news, and who was a good deal impressed by his generosity.

When Passon Metcalfe and Mr Frystone, the vicar of Yorely, took her to task for her superstitions, she seemed to meditate docilely on their reproof. The upshot of the meditation was an expression of mild wonder upon her strong features, and the remark—

"Whya, noo! In this warld there's a vast o' differ, both i' folks an' things. I should ha' thowt there were a peck o' matters you didn't

rightly ken. But happen you do, an' it mun be a gurt comfort !”

Mr Frystone once owned to his close friend the Passon, whom he had first met on the ground of their classical studies, and now loved and revered as a saint—though he deplored his views—that she was harder to tackle than a four-pounder in the weedy pool below the hiping-stanes.

Though she was now housekeeper for the Passon, she had not utterly forsaken the cottage in the heather. Every May she opened it afresh to the light, and spent her nights and part of her days there, coming down to Parsifal daily to look after home affairs. The only drawback to this arrangement was that Mrs Seaton took advantage of it to arrange things in her own way for the good of the minister ; and it gave Sally some trouble to circumvent her.

Twice a week the good minister climbed the steep path to the cottage—his thin figure bending above his staff—to find his tea spread on the rustic table under the wind-blown hawthorn on the grass plot.

September was coming in, warm and still. The summer had kept back her heat until she sighted autumn; and as he sat in his chair, with Kransu at his feet, he was glad of the shade above him. He had finished his second cup, and was lying back restfully; his hands folded upon the shawl which Sally, ever careful of him, had wrapped about his knees.

"So you also think Ralph Pigot was attached to her, Sally! I must confess I feel sore for the poor lad; it is a hard blow. However, a true love has, I believe, great power, and it may work a change in him."

The Passon coughed huskily.

The old woman standing there, rugged and masculine, in a coat of her late brother's which reached to her ankles, and a stout pair of man's boots on her feet, looked away, a gentle pity softening her furrowed face. She knew enough of his life to read a hidden pathos in the words.

"Ah've neeän mich hope o' Rafe Pigot," she said at last. "He cums of a bad stock; his feeäther, auld Marmaduke, wer a bad un i' his time. Ah reckon he'd ha' liked to do Mr Seaton

a mischief i' them days. Ah isn't forgettin', Passon. Eh! Ah dreeämed a foul dreeäm t' night afore t' last."

Mr Metcalfe sat up quickly, roused from his hopeful anticipations of Ralph's improvement. He threw the shawl aside with some impatience. On one subject he had a standing dispute with his housekeeper.

"I wish you would give up this folly concerning dreams and portents. As if immortal souls in the care of the Most High could be instructed by the humours of a dreaming brain." His voice conveyed extreme disapproval. Sally quietly replaced the rug.

"You've n' occasion to get cold, dree-äms or no dreeäms," she answered, with her curious laugh; "t' rheumatiz cums to good uns as well as bad uns. As Ah've tellt you afore, Passon, eeäther God or t' devil sends me my dreeäms. Whichiver on 'em it is, they've a trick o' cumin' true. Ah didn't maze my heeäd wi' mich larnin', but Ah've heeärd 'at th' Almighty hisselt sent t' auld fowk messages and revelations i' Bible days. Na doobt if He chose He could

teach fowk i' t' saäme way now. Happen he does!"

"Whya!" she went on energetically, "dreeäms tells me a vast o' things. I shouldn't like to have t' devil to thank for 'em." She turned squarely round on the minister.

"Nor should I," he said gently. "God does teach by marvellous methods; but with you, Sally, I always feel that you let yourself be guided by every chance sign, reading all sorts of meanings in it. For myself, I prefer to trust God Himself. Do you see what I mean?" His kind eyes rested affectionately upon the wrinkled face.

"Bless your heart!" the old woman cried, with a quaint, humorous smile; "deeänt be tryin' to clear up your meeänin' to me. A blind man could see what you meeän, though he'd happen think you a bit near-sighted. Ah looks at it i' this way. If t' dreeäms cum, and cum true, a good Un sends 'em. When Ah find 'em comin' true mair nor a score o' times, Ah sal be a fule if Ah deeänt tak' heed to t' twenty-first. Ah'd be rare and glad if you'd listen, Passon.

T' night afore t' last, Ah seeämed to be in a varry lile kirk ; it wesn't i' this dale. A good few fowk were i' t' kirk, an', standin' heeäd and shouthers aboon t' rest, wer Anthony Seaton. Nigh him wer t' auld Quaker fra Ribbledale, 'at cums twice i' t' year to see him. There wer two by t' altar ; one on 'em wes bonny Joan, bless her, and t' other wes a mon ——. Eh, it couldn't be Humphrey Stansfeld, for though Ah couldn't rightly see t' face on him, he turned his heeäd a bit, an' t' hair on his forehead wer as white as yon." She pointed to a pool in the heather, whitely shining in the sun.

"Ah was that mazed by t' look of it 'at Ah didn't see t' face plain. But," she bent forward impressively, "t' Pigots allus gets a grey heeäd varry young, an' Rafe's beginnin', young as he is. Eh, Ah'm *afeared* it wes Rafe ; Ah'm *afeared* it wes. An' he's gotten' a foul look with him o' lately. Neä, it couldn't be Humphrey !"

The Passon was now really angry. He grasped his stick and rose gravely, stumbling over Kransu, who backed hastily on the delicate springs of his feet.

"Don't let me hear you speaking of this again, I beg you, Sally. You are sure to make mischief if you do. And your suggestions with regard to that poor lad are really shameful. It is just as I said. You are allowing yourself to be carried away by a wicked folly; and your very nature, which I know to be naturally a kind one, is getting spoilt by it. You ought to be full of pity for Ralph. I trust he will remember," he said anxiously, "how many men have had to go through the same trial."

Sally was imperturbable. "It disn't mend a man's leg to know that his neebour's brok' his, Passon. As for Rafe Pigot gettin' a change thruff sorrow, well, Him 'at's above 's stronger than a bad mon; but t' apple disn't roll far fra t' tree, an' theirs is a wicked soort o' tree. Crossed love wi' some folk breeds a fire in t' heart, an' a fire there maks a reek¹ i' t' heeäð that hatches a heeäp o' ugly thowts. It'll tak' Him 'at kens all, to master him."

There was a solemn sadness in her eye which might have comforted the minister. But he had

¹reek—smoke.

already opened the wooden gate, too outraged in spirit to remain. She watched the bent head, as it dropped below the hill, with an indulgent smile. Halfway down the road the Passon seated himself upon the grassy bank. He looked behind him. Kransu sat upon the heather, an orange patch in the strong light; and Sally's head rose above the gate.

"Poor thing," he murmured. "I hope I was not hasty. Ignorance requires infinite patience."

And the object of his pity said to Kransu: "He kens na mair aboot sin nor a babby. Ivery lad and lass he knew i' swaddling-clothes are sure to com' right i' t' end. An' o' Sunday he talks aboot t' ill pläace as if he'd seen it. Whya! if he beleeäved all he says, he'd die afore t' morn for misery."

This bank was a favourite seat of Mr Metcalfe's. He used to sit there in his youth, and not alone. It was high enough to cover all the beauty of the northern side, and of the bottoms, through which the clear river wound in five shimmering curves. The hot air quivered to the crack of the Thurstane guns upon the moor

opposite, and at the back of the Scar were piled masses of fleecy clouds, violet in the shadows. The trees about Thurstane, and every copse and patch of woodland, threw a spot of shade upon the wide bosom of the valley. Scropely Castle to the right, so grim on a grey day, was transfigured into beauty, and arrested his eye as it travelled slowly over the whole beloved landscape. The ruddy trunks of the group of tall firs which stand midway between the river and the Scar flamed in the horizontal radiance; his glance stayed *there*.

It was there that all his happiest hopes had suddenly withered, when the girl whom he loved told him pitifully that her heart was already in another man's keeping. He could see her now, letting the fir-needles sift through her fingers, as she tried to comfort him by assuring him that there were a hundred more desirable people waiting for him than herself. The crest of life's hill lay far in the background, and he had not yet met one of them, nor ever would.

The light grew more level and intense. Parsifal lay in a bloom-like haze; the road above the

hanging woods stretched curiously sharp and clear between Feldfoot and the village. He lifted himself drearily, and, with his stick held behind him in his clasped hands, began to descend again.

There was someone riding hard on the road below. "Humphrey, of course," Mr Metcalfe said to himself. "And Ralph! What a pace!"

The second man, Ralph, was tossing something in his hand; was it a ball attached to a string? Ah! it was no doubt that strange lasso he had brought from Mexico; the Passon had long wanted to see it.

"How odd his action is," he exclaimed, half-aloud.

Ralph was swinging it in wide circles round his head; he had fallen somewhat behind Humphrey. Suddenly he rose in the saddle, the whirling ball at the end of the lasso shot out straight at the man in front. There was something so definite and calculating in his movements that the minister cried, "Take care," forgetting the distance between him and them. His quick fear saw

Humphrey caught and dragged from his horse, through the unthinking mischief of his wild friend.

"Hold!" he shouted again. But as the word passed his lips a white figure rose at the side of the way with uplifted arms, and Humphrey's horse swerved, the ball flying into empty space and striking the ground a stone's throw beyond. Humphrey recovered himself, and was carried through the village at a mad gallop by the frightened animal, Ralph clattering after him.

Passon Metcalfe in the meantime was running like a boy, his chest heaving violently, but he himself said afterwards that he had had no sense of physical exhaustion. To understand this extraordinary episode, to lift up the figure which had sunk to the ground, was his compelling desire. When he came into the street between his own house and the town, he stopped in yet greater amazement. Hastening to him with her hand outstretched was Joan. Her light dress, the excitement of her gesture, revealed to him at once that she was the appari-

tion, and that she had seen Ralph's rough joke, and had hastened to forestall it.

He went forward to meet her. "Poor child," he panted, "it was a most careless trick."

"Careless! O, Mr Metcalfe, it was *cruel*, wicked. He meant to hurt Humphrey, I saw his face."

"Hush, Joan, hush, my dear, you don't know what you're saying."

"Yes I do." Her eyes blazed with their passion of indignant horror and misery. "Ralph is a wicked man, and he wants to do Humphrey a mischief. Humphrey, who is always so kind to him."

"No, no," her old friend cried, seeking to soothe her.

"But he does; I've known it ever since we were engaged. I was getting a bunch of those tall bell-flowers when they rode up, and I saw—I saw his bad face! It's horrible," she faltered, "so horrible!"

"Joan!" Mr Metcalfe spoke with authority. He had nursed her on his knee, for years she had been his pupil at her parents' wish, in spite

of the displeased comments of Parsifal folk, who thought a learned woman out of place, a kind of crowing hen. At this moment she was the little Joan again, to be controlled as well as comforted.

She looked at him piteously. "You didn't see him," she said; "the triumphant eyes—the smile!"

"No, I was too far off; but you, on the contrary, saw too much. How could you, my child, get such a notion into your head? Ralph injure his own best friend! O, what a preposterous idea, and what a silly Joan!"

He made her walk beside him, and in a loving, awkward way, smoothed her roughened hair. The little crowd, drawn to the other end of the town by the belief that the two men were riding a race, was separating into little groups of two and three, and coming leisurely back.

"Do you truly believe that Ralph was in play?" Joan asked solemnly, seeking to read the minister's real conviction in his eyes.

"I do," he answered earnestly.

"O, I wish I could!" she cried out, with childlike abandon, "I wish I could!"

The first group met them, laughing. "I'd bet twenty to one on the Thurstane mare!" said the foremost, Denis Heseltine, a muscular young dalesman, of a fresh complexion and merry eye, taking his cap off to Joan.

"Oh!" said the minister, "Joan doesn't enjoy these furious races. She has been a little frightened."

"You thought Humphrey would be thrown, eh?" said Denis, falling back from his companions for a moment. "I could have told you better than that, Miss Seaton; he sticks like a bur. Don't let yourself be frightened for him when he has a horse under him!" He lifted his cap again and joined his friends.

The pair walked on in silence, passing at last under the arching honeysuckle over the Seatons' doorway into the house. Joan opened the door of the Sunday parlour. Supper is spread here," she said, "but it will be late before father and mother get back from Fors. You must have a cup of coffee now, made after your own

way, dear Passon." She smiled a wintry smile, and bringing forward a quaint arm-chair, took his stick from him and left the room. He was glad to let her go ; he knew she wanted to regain her composure, and his own strength was spent.

As he sat in the quiet, he became more anxious. He was angry with himself, because now Sally's words came back to him and gave a deeper colour to poor Joan's suspicions. And yet, how unlikely it was ! How absolutely incredible !

When Joan came back with his cup of fragrant coffee and the cheese-cakes that his ascetic mind reproved him for enjoying, she was quite calm, though her lovely bloom had vanished, and there were grey shadows under her eyes. The good man felt her to be in a more reasonable state. As he stirred his coffee, he set the case before her as it appeared to him ; still with much conviction.

She nodded gravely. "I hope it is as you say," she said, and waited, considering. Then her head went up, her troubled eyes looked full at the minister.

"I can't see it as you do," she said, resolutely. "Twice now, Rafe has been very rude and provoking to me because of Humphrey; and the last time he said something, which, if he meant it, couldn't be worse and might prepare one for anything. Besides," she added, quickly, "I *feel* there is something bad in him where we are concerned."

"Said something, did he?" meditated her old friend uncomfortably. Feminine *feelings* he brushed aside—they were unworthy of consideration at a moment of importance. "Could you tell me what he said, my dear?"

"It mightn't seem much to you, Mr Metcalfe, not unless you had seen him, but I *know* he had horrid, wicked thoughts when he spoke."

"Well, I cannot judge! It mystifies me altogether. But of one thing I am sure, Joan, you must never impress your suspicions on Humphrey. It would bring about terrible trouble, if his mind were taken up with this idea. He is a dear lad, a fine lad"—he laid his frail hand on hers—"but the Stansfelds are, if you will bear with me, a stiff-necked genera-

tion for good and evil, and if you make bad blood between the lads, I don't know where it will end. Be brave and good, Joan, and all will be well."

The girl shook her head, but she did not contradict her old friend. She occupied herself in arranging afresh the long tendrils of Virginia creeper with which she had decked the table. It was indeed difficult to her to speak at all. In spite of her outward composure, her spirit was terribly disturbed.

The gate clicked, and a man's step sounded on the flagged path. "Here he is!" she cried, running into the passage, carried out of her usual shyness. She met him with outstretched arms as he strode in, hot and dusty, and lifted her face to his.

"O Humphrey!" she sobbed, her self-control breaking down at last.

"Why, Joan," he said, clasping her to him, and laying his cheek against her hair, "Rafe says you thought he was going to hit me with that confounded lasso!"

"Yes," she whispered.

"And you rose out of the ground like an angel, and made the mare swerve out of the fling of it. Is that it? And trembling yet! If he doesn't keep his tricks to himself I'll steal the thing. It might be dangerous—but I don't think he could have hit me, darling. It would have taken a splendid shot to do that. How that mare went; she never stopped till we came in sight of Yorely! You are not upset about it still, are you?" he questioned, trying to see her face.

"I hope," said Mr Metcalfe, coming out, "that you see what a compliment she paid you. She wouldn't have rushed out like that before a spirited horse but for her belief that you could sit through anything. I thought she was a ghost. Where's my stick, Joan?"

"Do wait for father," she begged, "there will be the paper, and the news of the Mutiny. He will want to talk it over with you."

But Mr Metcalfe refused to wait. He was shaken and disquieted, and longed for the stillness of his study. When he was in his chair by the window, with no other company but the

portrait of Calvin, and the great presence of the hills and sky, this perplexing matter might resolve itself into insignificance.

The little hard-backed chair close to the window, and the old worn table, with its great pile of books, all contained within the area of a warm rug of Sally's making, was his workplace. But his tabernacle was within the walls of the hills, and roofed by the moving clouds. And there were hours when the clouds of the firmament fled away and heaven itself roofed the sanctuary.

When Humphrey described to Agatha the scene of the afternoon, she remonstrated with him for his intimacy with Ralph. "I sometimes think he is mad," she said.

"Why! you wouldn't have me break a friendship that has lasted, you might say, for centuries?"

No, not break it, she thought, but *dilute* it. She was sure Joan would not like to have him much at Thurstane. Joan was not the person to stand nonsense.

Humphrey laughed. "He did me a splendid

turn to-day, anyhow. Joan was so upset by his senseless trick, aiming at me with that gim-crack, that she could scarcely do enough for me, bless her sweet soul ! She promised at last, Agatha, to come to me for always, just before Christmas ! Think of it ! ”

“ Did she ? ” Agatha’s face was nearly as happy as his own. She was standing by him, with his candle in her hand, and she leaned her head against his arm.

“ You look as if I’d made you a present,” he said, looking down at her, his voice very pleased and kind.

“ I have wanted her to come for so long, Humphrey. Father thought the world of Joan. I believe we loved her before you did.” She sang softly an old rhyme :

“ Black and red, black and red,
Black crown and yellow head,
That’s how Thor Stansfeld’s sons shall wed.”

“ Ah ! ” said Humphrey, drawing a great breath, his eyes lighting up. He took his candle and kissed her, and at the top of the stairs he bent down to her over the rail. “ You can’t

expect me to be hard on Rafe to-night." He stopped again a few paces further on.

"By the by, you'll be a sort of sister to Kirster now, Agatha." But there was no reply from the hall below.

The mere mention of Kirster's name had grown to be an anguish to Agatha.

Pain,—the lonely pain of an unreturned love, the scorching pain of pride, and the pain of his absence,—throbbed through her every time she heard him spoken of during the four years. If the sting of pride had grown less sharp, the uncommunicable sorrow lay heavier on her heart.

CHAPTER VI

THE MELL-FEAST

THE last sheaf of the harvest had been gathered ; it was a great one, with a great destiny. It was the mell-sheaf. From time immemorial the *mell* or harvest supper, representing the stretch of dale from Danbrigg to Yorely, had been held at Thurstane. Mr Frystone, who knew everything that anyone at that time knew—though I have heard him mentioned with contempt by the rising generation of girls and boys—told me once that *mell* is the Scandinavian “mel” or meal.

In the middle of the great hall at Thurstane the mell-sheaf stood garnished with ribbons and pranked with wreaths of ripening berries, a centre for the crowd of dancers. There was one night for the farm-labourers and hired men ; and another for the farmers, their wives and daughters, and such of the Yorely and Danbrigg people as were friends of the Stansfelds. And to most

of the guests these were the great events of the year. Christmas was a notable time, the mid-summer fair was a convenient date to hang events upon, besides bringing about a host of merry meetings, but the mell-supper was the most comfortable time of all; the great ingatherings of the year were over, and the wheat-ears of the mell-sheaf nodded a "Rest, and be thankful." This year the sheaf had to stand for the first night in the big barn, which was yet longer and wider than the hall: there were so many bidden to the dance. It was a trying occasion for Joan. There were speeches after the usual pattern, extolling the harvest and the giver of the supper, and ignoring the fact that this year, owing to the early drought, the yield on the uplands had been undeniably thin. There were constant allusions to Joan, and the young host's concerns generally, but no one took anything amiss; nor was the Thurstane shepherd misunderstood when, after giving, for a Yorkshireman, fervent expression to his admiration of "t' young laädy," whom he called "a non-such," he wound up by wishing his master

"many on 'em, and a long life wiv' em all." It was understood that his mind, evidently flustered and made a little heady by applause, had strayed into birthday congratulations.

Agatha, standing in the rear of Joan, was not allowed to be obscured, but received a hearty cheer from the company generally. And the old cowherd, the oldest of her brother's farm men, gave a testimony of love to her abiding charity and kindness, he being the spokesman for the rest.

It was with hot cheeks that the two girls ran out into the cool night when the company had left.

"It has made me wonder," said Joan, "whether we ought to let you go to Parsifal, even for a few months. Everybody will miss you, and I shall never learn all your ways."

"Nonsense," answered Agatha, gaily, "I was never made to be mistress of Thurstane. I shall ask Humphrey to give me the cottage below the Scar. I shall keep a hospital there for all the weak calves and sick lambs, and some day I shall write a chronicle of the Stansfelds!"

"Agatha," said Joan, "I sometimes wonder, too, if you ever had thoughts of, well, of such happiness as this of ours, and if anything happened to make you put it by. Have I vexed you?" She put her arms round the other's slight waist.

But Agatha, elf-like and unsubstantial in the darkness, was in no mood for seriousness, it seemed.

"It's bad manners to wonder," she said, lightly, "let us have a run round the courtyard and fancy we are eight years old again."

Joan and her parents arrived with the last of the guests on the second night. "We're not going to seem to lay hold of Thurstane before our time," said Mrs Seaton to her perplexed husband.

To him the new relationship made their presence at any hour obviously natural, but he left the matter in her hands.

In the small tower there were the bedrooms, the withdrawing room, and one or two little parlours. Jane Caley was in the guest-chamber when Mrs Seaton and Joan entered it to lay

aside their wraps. There was a fine distance in the manner of the former, as of one who was not very intimate with the household.

Jane sprang up and embraced her friend gently, mindful of the delicate flounces of India muslin, Kirster's gift, and the lace, fine as a cobweb, out of Mrs Seaton's small store.

"You look beautiful," she cried.

"Not as pretty as you do, Jane, I'm sure of that," and Joan held her away from her admiringly.

It was Mr Frystone who said that Jane Caley was like a harebell. To-night, in her sky-blue tulle, she resembled the flower as much as a human being may. Her head, with its wealth of flaxen hair, drooped a little above her tall slenderness. Her white skin, blue-veined at the temples, had so faint a flush on the cheek that it was more a tint than a colour; and her eyes, sweet and wistful, were of the harebell blue.

Her mother, whom Mrs Seaton honoured by considering as in some sort a rival, was by turns provoked and gratified by Jane's delicate appear-

ance. It was a proof of family refinement or family degeneration, according to the complexion of the moment.

When the two girls had given to each other's dress a final embellishing touch; and Mrs Seaton had left the room in obedience to a summons from Sally, who, on these occasions, ruled the kitchen; Jane put her hand softly upon Joan's arm.

"Is Rafe to be here to-night?" she asked in a low voice, her cheeks glowing with a sea-shell pink.

"He's sure to come," answered the other, shaking her head at her.

"Joan," she whispered, lifting pathetic eyes to her friend, "I wish he didn't like you so much. I'm afraid he does!"

"Jane," said Joan, mimicking her and holding her by the chin, "I wish you didn't like *him* so much. I'm afraid you do! You're worth a thousand of him!"

A sigh was the only answer, and, hand in hand, the two girls went downstairs, through the little hall, and into the great dancing-room.

Humphrey and Agatha, according to time-honoured custom, were standing one on either side the door ; and over Humphrey's proud face came a flush of joy as his beautiful sweetheart advanced to him, the diadem of her hair shining red-gold in the light. He received Jane with special kindness, for her own sake and for Joan's.

" Rather shy ! " remarked Mr Frystone, quizzically, as Joan passed him to greet his wife, " and Stansfeld-like, tilting her head an inch higher to carry it off ! "

The floor-space was so great that though the guests were many there was no crowding. The elder men and women sat well back against the wall on both sides. The mell-sheaf, brave in its twining ribbons and flowers which waved in the draught of the open door, was in the middle of the floor. The fire in the enormous grate blazed high, sending its light far and wide, and a great part of its heat up the chimney. There was, however, no fear of chill, though the night was raw and drizzling. The oil-lamps, upon extemporised brackets, and the clustered candles

in the ancient sconces between the trefoil windows, added to the thickness of the walls, kept out the cold.

Near the fire in a chair, high-backed as his own, sat Mr Seaton, watching the groups of young people gathered in the centre. His wife was still kept in the kitchen by Sally.

But there were several matrons present to give a countenance to the proceedings, stoutest and most gorgeous of them all, Mrs Caley. She detained Joan as she came towards her father; her large peony face beamed with kindness.

"Well, you *are* bonnie to-night, and so you ought to be! I always say if a young lass doesn't do her mother credit before her wedding, she won't afterwards. Is that the ring Humphrey gave you? It isn't much of a thing to look at—but there, it shows his sense! I like a thrifty man, he doesn't backen himself like a spend-all. Besides, Humphrey can give you a better any day."

"I don't want a better, Mrs Caley."

"You see, there is this in it. Miss Joan,

whom, by the by, I was once allowed to call 'Joan,' has got that about her which doesn't need adorning. I expect Stansfeld thinks so." The speaker made a ceremonious bow.

It was the Honourable Harry Darcy who spoke, Lord Coverley's grandson, and heir to Scropely and Wathden Manor. He was an elegant slight man of a tanned face and a blasé eye. He had been more or less friendly with Kirster and Humphrey, and had a keen appreciation of the value of the latter's vote. Of late Joan had received the attentions, no doubt as a compliment to Humphrey, who, however, was more annoyed by them than by Ralph's behaviour. He never could take Rafe seriously. On the other hand, the girl herself regarded the admiration of young Darcy with an amused indifference; but she believed that her glimpse of Rafe's mind justified both resentment and fear. Mr Metcalfe's words, however, held her silent.

"Mr Darcy rains compliments, doesn't he, Mrs Caley?" she said, dropping him a mocking curtsey. "We poor Parsifal folks don't know how

to take them. We fight shy of them as a kind of London-made sweet. Did you never hear, Mr Darcy, of the travelling confectioner who tried to sell chocolate and Turkish delight at Fors. No! Ah, then, I won't tell, you, it isn't polite."

Mrs Caley pushed young Darcy and his protestations unceremoniously aside, and drawing Joan nearer to her, examined a flounce of her dress.

"Come from Kirster? And your mother's lace; and taste too, I reckon! Now if it had been on Jane, what with her skin and my notions, she'd have looked like a tallow candle! But Judith was always out of the common. I used to say it when we were girls together."

Mrs Caley, happiest of wives and mothers, always proudly conscious of her seven sons and her one pretty daughter, and aware that the dale generally preferred her hams to Mrs Seaton's, never failed to speak of her with a frank admiration.

"Agatha's got a piece of the same," she went on, "and very nice she looks in it with

those bows of velvet. Red lights up a black Stansfeld as never was! She minds me of Judith, but she's a good bit paler, and not near her for spirit. I dare say she's pining a bit at leaving Thurstane. But there, I won't keep you. Young to young, I say, natural enough."

She gave Joan a motherly kiss in defiance of the assembled company, and re-arranged the folds of her purple brocade, seen on these occasions, after various fashions, for the last ten years. Then she found time for young Darcy.

But he evidently preferred the daughter to the mother. His town-bred flatteries had brought a blush-rose to her cheek, but her glance wandered to where Rafe Pigot's handsome head, with its early sprinkle of grey, leaned against the curve of the arch leading to the ancient kitchen and the staircase of the high tower. There was a lowering passion in his gaze. She stifled a sigh, for his sullen eye was fixed upon the radiant figure standing now by Mr Seaton's chair.

Joan and Agatha, one on either side, were bending over him. He was laughing and expostulating. His stick was between his knees, and he had Agatha's slim fingers in one large hand, whilst the other rested upon his daughter's waist. He had dressed himself with unusual care for Joan's sake.

The coat of fine blue cloth, and the waistcoat, nether garments, and gaiters of light fawn colour, if somewhat old-fashioned, suited his magnificent proportions as no more modern dress could have done. The white waves of his hair, newly cut and trimmed by Sammy, the Parsifal postman and barber, followed the noble curves of his head and made a silver softness about a face whose grand lines had caused the Yorely doctor to hope "that Mr Seaton would have his effigy cut on his tombstone."

"Yes, the very handsomest man in the room, isn't he?" Joan appealed to Agatha.

"Humphrey included?" asked the latter.

"Certainly, he's not old enough to be at his handsomest yet. But, Agatha, you didn't answer! Surely you don't think the Heseltine

carrots are equal to that ? ” She pointed to her father’s hair. “ Is there anybody here to come up to him ? ”

“ Not a single man in the room,” answered Agatha decisively. If the wistfulness deepened in her eyes, or if there was an unusual accent on the last three words, neither Joan nor her father noticed it.

Mrs Seaton arrived at that moment, satisfaction embodied. The supper was in a state of successful preparation, conversation was general. Her heart throbbed with pride as she approached the group by the fireside. But when Humphrey had fetched Joan for the first dance, a shadow fell upon the three left behind.

“ We miss him more every year,” said the father, sadly.

The two women had no need to ask *his* name.

Long after Mrs Seaton was busy with the older guests, Agatha, refusing to dance or to join the quaint games around the mell-sheaf on plea of fatigue, sat on a stool by her cousin Anthony. His presence soothed her. As the first hour wore on she grew rested and at peace.

She saw Kirster again moving in the dance, tall among the tallest, stalwart beside the sturdiest. Again, he was chatting with the old folks in his courteous fashion and laughing with the young ones. She would scarcely have been surprised if he had suddenly appeared in actual living form before her. The air was full of his remembered accents.

She looked at her guests. Few London ball-rooms could show such a fine-featured assemblage. The farmers around were mostly descendants of the great old families ; there were but few present whose forefathers had not done good service in the making of England, when for the making a stout arm and a good blade were needed. The faces and the names which belonged to them gave life to the past.

Yes, so it had been for centuries—the Pigots, the Seatons, the Heseltines, the Coniers, the Metcalfes, the Whartons, the Darcys, and the Stansfelds. For hundreds of years these families had trodden the squared trunks of the oaken floor, and made the heavy rafters ring.

Her mind widened till itself was like the

ancient hall; and the men and women whose blood was in her veins walked up and down under the old roof-tree and mingled with the dancers. She and Joan knew every page of the family history, and to-night its bygone days laid their grave-clothes by. There stood Humphrey bowing low to Joan, who made the pretty reverence of fifty years ago. And beside him, surely, was Captain Thomas, who played the man at Agincourt, and elbow to elbow with Joan, stood his bride, the rose of the Dacres. It seemed to Agatha that neither the dark vigour of the Captain nor the rich bloom of his wife, as she imagined them, put to shame the beauty of the girl or the gallant bearing of their descendant. Others of her dead were there, and amongst them Sir Humphrey himself, the high water mark of the family success. There, too, was the Seaton, whom Brian Stansfeld had done to death from motives of policy, and in disobedience to the "vision;" for which disobedience he had ever since walked the long aisles of Danbrigg Church at midnight, confessing his sins and shivering in the grip of an eternal frost.

Her dream was broken by Denis Heseltine's voice.

"You have been sitting still for an hour, Miss Agatha. It's just come to this, that unless you dance with me I won't dance again. There, that's flat."

Denis Heseltine stamped his foot resolutely, and offered her his arm.

Her only dislike to the honest lad came from her aunt's perpetual laudation of him; and as Mr Seaton put in a plea for him, Agatha suffered herself to be led triumphantly away.

It was just after this waltz, which Joan, to Humphrey's ill-concealed annoyance, danced with Harry Darcy, that Mr Frystone asked Joan to sing.

It was her joy to sing the songs which her father loved, and to sing them for him at any time in her clear voice, which was both true and sweet.

"Let it be 'Young Lochinvar' then, please," urged Mr Darcy, who had heard it one day when he called to see Kirster just before his departure for India.

Only two men in the gathering knew that this song was the end of Joan's happiness for the night; and the heads of both these stood out by reason of their dark hair against the mass of northern colouring, flaxen, light brown, and red. With the exception of Humphrey they were alone in this respect. One of them was Ralph Pigot, and the other Fred Williams, the little Welsh doctor of Yorely.

Ralph had taken up his old position by the door, his tall, lightly-hung figure contrasting oddly with the short, thick-set man at his side.

The doctor disliked his neighbour. It was owing to Ralph that his efforts at sanitary reform in Parsifal-Dion had been foiled. Ralph had used his influence with his father and Mr Caley, the largest landowners on this side of the river, to prevent the cutting of a drain through the fields.

The little man edged himself further away.

Joan sang with her hand resting on the back of her father's chair, Humphrey by her side. She had never looked so vividly beautiful; her happiness shed about her a most moving loveli-

ness, not yet forgotten by those who saw her. She sang the ballad with spirit, and her eyes, looking through the opposite window, seemed to follow her hero through the stir of his deed. But when it came to

“There was racing and chasing on Cannobie Lea,”

they suddenly dropped as though drawn by some influence to the right, dilating in unaffected fear.

The doctor looked quickly aside, and immediately discovered the cause of the change in the sneering challenge of the face above him.

“Why ! the fellow’s a brute !” ejaculated the fiery Welshman under his breath ; “he’s frightened her somehow. If I were Stansfeld I’d thrash him till he squirmed ! Catch a man staring like that at the girl I’m going to marry !” His anger, however, gave place to admiration ; for even as her voice rang out in the two concluding lines—

“So daring in love and so dauntless in war,
Have ye ne’er heard of gallant like young Lochinvar,”

she returned Ralph’s look with one of such pure

scorn and indignation that the doctor audibly chuckled, and Ralph's bold eyes fell.

But her joy had fled, nor could she sing again. Through the old-fashioned dances and the merriment of the games, her heart beat heavily under the soft lace. She was right; Humphrey was mistaken. Ralph was a revengeful man, a bad man: not the audacious butterfly the world held him for.

She shrank from the elaborate compliments of Marmaduke Pigot, a man of considerable distinction of bearing; with his son's light wide-shouldered build, and wearing his white hair cut after a military fashion, his thick moustache still glossily black. The cold admiration in the glance of John Pigot of Lower Ghyll, the brother of Marmaduke, and known as the hardest and cruellest man in Askedale, was so repugnant to her that she hastily cut short his references to the proverbial beauty of the Seaton women, and escaped to the further end of the hall, where a group of girls and young men crowded round Mr Caley. Mrs Dan Stansfeld, in a brown watered silk, stood amongst them, tall and rigid as a sign-post. The

talk ran, as indeed it mostly runs in Askedale, upon horses. It is said there that "an Askedale barn kens mair aboot a hoss nor a far leärnt mon i' ither pairts." When John Netherby's famous trotting mare was brought through Parsifal last year, I heard its points discussed by two little lads in petticoats with a sense and judgment that anyone but a dalesman would have pronounced miraculous.

Mr Caley, broad and beaming as his wife, was describing two Clydesdales he had bought from Harry Percival, "just over the border into Westmoreland."

"Eh! but they're grand," he was saying. "Talking of horses, have you heard that Nat Thorburn's mare's had her picter taken. I bred her myself, and he bought her. The last two years have made a vast o' difference to her; she's the bonniest three-year-old you ever clapped eyes on. She's foriver bonnie, that she is! There's a sister of her's for you, Joan, when you're wed," he added, catching sight of her. "Well, Nat won't have nobody on her back but himself, and actually—when that great painter-

chap was staying at Hornaby t' last August, Nat heard of him, and asked him up into Deepdale for a two-three days' shooting. The end of it was that he painted t' mare's pichter—for fifty pound ! ”

There was a chorus of wonder and admiration.

“ Aye, and Nat's paid five pound for t' frame, real gold, I reckon.” The good man lifted his eyebrows and nodded his head. “ Heard you ever the like of that ? ”

His audience received this last piece of news with less noise, but more amazement. Yet in the comments which followed there was no censure. If Mr Thorburn had paid fifty pounds for a picture of Mrs Thorburn, there would have been no limit to the disapproval of his friends. But it was considered a proof of his public spirit that he should perpetuate the form and memory of a well-bred horse. Even Mrs Dan Stansfeld, but for whom the standard of public opinion might have occasionally declined, had nothing worse to say than—

“ Nat Thorburn's a far-seeing man. There'll be something more in it than comes out just yet. Any mole can see that ! ”

It was just upon supper-time; and the young people now scattered for the last dance, an elaboration of "Sir Roger."

Humphrey approached Mrs Seaton. "You can't refuse me to-night, mother."

It was the first time the dear name had been used by him. She looked up at him through a gathering haze of tears. Joy and sorrow agitated her as she walked with him to the top of the gay living avenue, which included young and old; only excepting Mr Seaton and Mr Metcalfe, who were talking tranquilly together by the fire. Joy in the filial gentleness of the son that was to be, and a sadness of longing for the son that was absent! It seemed to her that never in the four long years had she desired, with so passionate a desire, to see him and to hear him.

Joan, parrying Mr Frystone's affectionate banter, saw Humphrey leading out her mother, and smiled tenderly. Two men instantly hurried towards her, Harry Darcy and Ralph Pigot. In her anxiety to avoid the one, she took a step forward to meet the other; and again a jealous pang shot through Humphrey as he detected

Darcy's satisfaction. The young heir to Scropely was glad to be able to pay attention safely to a handsome girl. He had seen with chagrin that, though blithely friendly, she was altogether unmoved by his fascinations; and this positive preference was soothing to him.

It was a source, too, of comfort to poor Jane that Ralph at once transferred himself to her, the next prettiest girl in the room, hiding his rage within him as best he might.

Later, as he swung Joan round, he had his revenge.

"Do you see this?" he whispered, so quickly that she barely took in the sense of the words. But, after regaining her place, she recognised the discoloured object in his button-hole. She saw it again in its summer beauty, and heard again, "*He gathers, and I wear.*"

Her silence at supper deepened the cloud upon Humphrey's happiness. With a lover's folly, he exaggerated the graces of Harry Darcy, who sat opposite by Agatha's side; and winced at the recollection of the young aristocrat's commendation: "She's simply the prettiest girl I've seen

for ages, Stansfeld ; fit for any station, by Jove !” He had frowned at the time, but now it was to him an impertinence, an impertinence which could not be endured.

It was impossible to be annoyed with Joan. Not only did Love forbid, but her hand stole into his from time to time with a touch that carried a temporary balm for his vexation. Afterwards, when he was alone, he let the events of the evening breed an increasing dislike to the man ; and a more impatient eagerness for the last week in November, when Joan would be his own irrevocably.

As Ralph walked out of the ring of light cast into the black night by the Seatons’ phaeton lamps, his anger flared into wild oaths and gesticulations. His walk was that of a drunken man. Joan’s refusal to shake hands at parting, and the unconcealed contempt of her manner, acted upon his jealousy like a goad.

If she had been a different girl, things might not have come to so desperate a pass with him, unprincipled and fiery though he was ; and if she had appealed to his good nature, his best impulse might have made common cause with her.

Unfortunately, the very qualities which enthralled him—her gallant spirit and her frank disdain—made this treatment of him impossible. Her knowledge of his love alone would have awakened in her all her large pity; but his furious jealousy of Humphrey, now amounting to hate, and his insolent manner to herself, roused the spirit of battle within her.

She struggled to repress it, and tried to force herself into a conciliatory attitude, but his ways were as steel on flint, and struck from her the sparks of indignant speech before she could control herself. Every encounter strengthened Ralph's determination to win, come what would.

There was a curious mixture of levity and determination in the Pigot blood. A score of spots in Askedale were witness to their hare-brained folly and their relentless acts. They had, too, a strange luck in gratifying their wilfulness; oftentimes unfortunately, at the cost of reputation. At Flodden Field Sir Hubert Pigot, in the main a brave and honest knight, plunged aside from his command rather than rob himself of the fierce joy of bathing his

hands in the blood of an obscure enemy who had insulted him. And he reappeared from generation to generation in the person of one or more of his descendants.

Joan and Agatha trembled yet at a memory of their childhood. It was when they still stood at Mrs Seaton's knees to repeat their lessons that she had one day grown suddenly faint, and had fallen against her husband, as with a trembling deep voice, and an awful sternness in his eyes, he told her of the fate of John Pigot's daughter. This girl, having displeased her father by holding to her lover, one of the Stansfelds of Barton and the son of a man who got the better of him in a bargain, was turned out by him in her night-gown, to freeze under a sky of December; and she was found by the cowherd wandering amongst the byres, seeking for the shelter that was not denied to the beasts,—her poor mind gone.

As Ralph felt his way along the valley he looked back at the lights of Thurstane, the only stars in the black darkness.

"It will have to come to that, when all's

said," he muttered. "I'll never live to see her there." As he ascended to the gates of Higher Ghyll Farm, his mood changed.

"Why couldn't I have taken up with Jane? She's a deal too good for me, and has a skin like a lily! The devil's in it all." As his thought turned on Jane, her sweet, delicate face and its touching look of love rose before him, painted on the night.

CHAPTER VII

JOAN'S VICTORY

ONE Friday morning in November, just before the second calling of the banns of marriage for Humphrey and Joan; and when the dale-dwellers were waiting breathlessly for the Saturday's newspaper, which might confirm the almost incredible rumour of the taking of Delhi, Mrs Seaton stood at her door looking out upon the fog. She was wrapped in a grey fleecy shawl. She had been half-way down the village with some syrup of violets for Farmer Caley's only little grandson, now on a visit to Parsifal. It was a dream world in which she stood—hazy, uncertain, draped in fog from the crest of the Ridder to the hiping-stanes in the bottoms.

As Humphrey peered through the vapour from the street, he thought she might have been woven of the damp mists herself, so

slight and grey she stood there in the background.

"Joan's half-way to Yorely by this time," she cried, raising her voice as if the dim air removed him to an indefinite distance; "Sally fetched her to little Ned Cockburn, who's at death's door, I'm afraid. You will probably meet her coming back. You can't miss her, she's got on my old red cloak. The child's set on soldiers since his father went out last year, and Sally thought the colour might perhaps call him back, if his poor eyes aren't past seeing anything."

"I'll go and meet her," shouted Humphrey, vanishing down the lane.

He walked swiftly, but there was a dispirited droop about him, and his face was hollow about the mouth. He thought he had ample reason for low spirits, and the more he thought about it, the more miserable he became. Twenty-four hours ago, a mounted man had brought him some news from a cousin in Leeds, who owed him interest on moneys lent by old Kirster Stansfeld. Owing to bad trade in the

north, this cousin found himself unable to make the usual payment; and consequently Humphrey could not finally clear off the mortgage.

There had been nothing disquieting to him at first in this, for before another three months were over he would have settled the matter for ever. But for certain improvements and renovations for Joan at Thurstane, this question of the interest would have been of little importance.

It was Agatha who had made the misery.

"I am so sorry for you both," she said, feelingly, "and when all is ready and you have been so happy in the thought, too!"

Humphrey stared. "Whatever do you mean?" he said.

"Why—the wedding," she stammered, astonished in her turn. "I was thinking of your putting off the wedding."

They were sitting at dinner. Humphrey was in the act of taking some salt, and he spilt it over the table-cloth.

"You really can't mean that father would

have expected me to put off the whole thing when we're within a fortnight of the day, and the banns read, too ! I can't for the life of me believe that you can mean that. The mortgage will be paid off in a few weeks."

"Still, Humphrey, it was his last wish, and he died believing that you promised him, though you had not time to frame the words." Her face was very sad and anxious.

"I suppose it's living alone so much that makes you so morbid and ridiculous," said her brother, his anger rising. "There's this comfort, any way, Joan is far too healthy and sensible to take such an idea into her head. She shall come over and see what's the matter with you."

There was silence in the room, broken only by Humphrey's knife and fork.

At last in a low voice, "I think Joan will agree with me," came from Agatha.

Humphrey pushed his chair back. "Really, Agatha, you are enough to drive a man mad ; I can't think what's come to you !" He studied her with honest surprise.

"Besides, are you sure you can pay ? I

mean, mightn't some misfortune happen to prevent? Father wanted you to be quite *sure*." She hurried her words one after the other, resolved to say what was in her mind, though she feared to irritate him.

"Well," said Humphrey at last, bitterly, "if you want pleasant words and a taste of comfort, go to your sister!"

She saw him no more to speak to that day. Passing his little business-room she heard him pacing the floor; and once when she was cutting the last Michaelmas daisies in the courtyard, he was up there alone on the tower, black against the pale autumn sky. Her eyes filled. "But I couldn't let him forget, I dare not," she said to herself.

When morning came matters had so far changed that his own mind was greatly disquieted. He had seen again in his restless dreams the old man upon his death-bed, supported between Agatha and the nurse, closing his eyes contentedly because he recognised his son's willingness to make the only promise he had sought from him. There had been no time

for words, but they had understood each other.

Such a turn of events as this, however, Humphrey was certain his father had never contemplated. At one time he determined not to tell Joan, but to let things take their course; at another he vividly realised that it would be impossible for one of her character to forgive concealment. Before breakfast he came to the conclusion that she was sure to agree with him, sure to see things in a sensible way; also that he would casually mention the fact of his cousin's inability to send the money. There would be an end of it.

After breakfast his mood changed. Suppose the wedding put off—anything might happen; it might never take place at all! He ground his heel upon the grey flags in the courtyard. What about Harry Darcy, who had been oftener at Parsifal lately than during the whole of his life before, inventing important business for himself! Why too, had Lord Coverley driven through Parsifal to ask Anthony Seaton's advice about a horse for

the first time for thirty years? Simply and solely to see Joan, after hearing his grandson's description of her!

Here Humphrey was in the right,—but it was only to gratify himself as a connoisseur in pretty faces that the old lord took this unusual journey. He had also excelled all the young men in his courtly compliments to Joan; and had afterwards sent her as a wedding gift a miniature of a Seaton beauty set in delicate enamel and gold which he was pleased to say she strongly resembled, and which he said he had begged from the original a lifetime ago.

Humphrey, unhappy man, freely owned to himself that Joan would only be in her appropriate place as lady of Scropely and all the Coverley domains, but she was *his* Joan. Was it likely he should be fool enough to endanger the marriage, which, as Agatha assured him, no one would so gladly have welcomed as the father whom she was holding up as a bugbear, the destroyer of his son's happiness? If Harry Darcy were out of the way, he reflected sullenly, there were a score more who would put in a

claim. As it was, what did Fred Williams mean by his perpetual messages of kind regards and remembrance and what not, whenever Humphrey met him? And Rafe, too; but here Humphrey smiled—no, he could not pretend to take Rafe gravely.

As he came in sight of Parsifal he veered round to new considerations. The banns were actually read, it was ludicrous, impossible, to conceive of such a situation as a marriage postponed at the eleventh hour—for such a reason! Imagine Cousin Judith's reception of the news. Imagine Mrs Dan Stansfeld and the dale generally!

Perhaps it had been a promise—but—"Absurd!" he ejaculated, and walked on more quickly.

Mrs Jackson's cottage stood at the roadside, and a passer-by of average height could look over the white, short blinds into the sparsely furnished kitchen. To Humphrey, staring in from the fog, it was a delightful home-like interior, a fitting shrine for the group within. His trouble faded a little. There sat Joan on a low stool in her scarlet cloak, the firelight

making a glory of her hair, and on her knees lay the wasted body of a little child. She was singing softly ; he could not hear the words. The poor mother knelt beside her, so absorbed in watching her boy's face that she did not hear the opening of the door. But Joan lifted her head, and held up her finger.

The very sight of her drove his anxiety away, or rather her anxiety became his. The minutes went slowly by ; the short, laboured breathing, the only sound in the now quiet room, grew slower—longer—and suddenly the little lad's eyes were open and gazing wonderingly at Joan. They half-closed and opened again, and this time they were fixed on the scarlet cloak. "Soldiers, pretty," whispered the baby voice, "Clifford," it quavered thinly. The mother pressed her lips to the waxen hand lying on the comfortable folds. Joan sang—

"From Penigent to Pendle Hill,
From Linton to Long Addingham,
And all that Craven coasts did till
They with the lusty Clifford came."

A sweet content settled on the child's face, he

moved his head away from the fire, and fell into a sound, natural sleep. Joy illuminated the faces of the women; the mother held out her arms beseechingly.

"Wait a little," said Joan, gently. But when the time passed, and the frail body grew heavier on her lap, she lifted him tenderly and laid him in the work-worn arms; he was sleeping so profoundly that he never knew of the change of nurses, nor that the bright vision which had called back his dying life vanished away.

"Come," said Joan to Humphrey. As she softly shut the door, she whispered, "He will get well now." Her colour, heightened by the fire, glowed under the rim of dark fur round the hood which she had pulled over her head. Her thankfulness showed itself in the glad and smiling curves of her mouth. She stepped as if she trod on air.

"You will be wet through before you get home," he said, testing the thickness of the cloak between his thumb and finger. She turned a radiant face to him.

"And if I am, it won't hurt. Nothing could

hurt me to-day. Dear little lamb! Sally said he would come round if he awoke sensible."

Humphrey took her hand; his heart was hot within him. "It would call anybody back to find you there, like that. I should come, yes, from the dead."

"If you found mother's cloak there, you mean," she said lightly, but she did not draw her hand away.

Her spirit was buoyant as a bird. She had been so entirely happy during the last few weeks. Ralph had been away for a month; a kind of late summer of satisfaction had overtaken her mother, and removed the one flaw in the home delight. And to-day the grave had given back her little favourite.

Winged with joy, she walked along in the swift oncoming manner of the Stansfelds, not noticing her lover's pre-occupation. They had reached the first opening in the fields, now visible through the thinning of the fog, when she suddenly glanced at him—her cheek dimpled.

"It must be a fine comfort," she said, meditatively.

There was no reply. Humphrey's expression was moody and absent. He tugged violently at his moustache.

"Yes," she sighed, "I wish I had one; but I suppose I never shall."

"What, Joan! What is it you want?" He shook off his engrossing thought.

"You won't be able to help me. Nobody can." This reflection apparently made her very melancholy. "Life would be a different thing if I had one."

"But what is it, my dear lass? Give me at least a notion; I don't understand."

"Don't you? Why, this, of course." Quickly wheeling in front of him, she laid a light forefinger upon the tormented moustache. "Ever since I was two, I have noticed that it is a wonderful comfort when men are bothered—or cross! When they haven't a moustache, they pull their whiskers. It doesn't seem fair that they should be helped out in that way, does it?"

"O, Joan," burst out Humphrey, encouraged by the sweet mischief of her face, "I'm not cross, but I *am* shockingly bothered."

"Tell me, then." She swung his hand backwards and forwards, crooning another verse of little Ned's ballad.

"It is only this," he said, trying to speak carelessly; "I really am a fool to think twice about it. You'll only laugh at me for worrying. I shall have to wait a month or two to pay off the last of the mortgage."

"O, Humphrey!" The gay spirit blenched. Her tone gladdened him; to her, too, then a postponement would be a sorrowful disappointment; he would soon reassure her.

"Why, sweetheart, it doesn't matter. It will be all the same to us. A few weeks after our wedding I shall clear it off for ever."

"After our wedding," she repeated, mystified. "You forget. It has to be paid *first*."

They stood still, looking at each other. All Ralph's persecutions, his significant hints, his insolent glances, returned upon her with a new weight. And Humphrey, what was he saying?

"That's the mere letter of the thing! Father only wanted to be sure that the old

place was free. It will be all right, my darling."

"I don't see how it can be," she said sadly, "a promise is a promise. We can't be married until it is all paid off, of course." Then the sense of Humphrey's words leapt to her brain. Was it true? What could a couple of months really matter? The old dogging dread had clutched her again. If this postponement should lead to loss of Humphrey! And Ralph, what opportunities the delay would give him of angering her—it might even be, of injuring her lover. Still, why should Humphrey have been bothered?

Two men passed. They were strangers, and gazed hard at the girl, but she was too absorbed to notice them. She was struggling with a strong temptation

"There," said Humphrey, throwing back his shoulders as if released from a load, "don't let us speak of it again, you know I shall pay, Joan. Only, I should like to have cleared it off."

"Yes;" she walked on again. All at once she stopped. "It was a promise to the dead,"

she began hurriedly. "Yes, yes, it was. Humphrey, we never could break it. I remember it all so well. Father was there, and he told me about it. You hadn't time to speak, but you would have spoken if you could, and that made him so happy. Dear Cousin Kirster! No, it isn't possible."

"Joan!" He faced her with pleading eyes, his face quivered. "Do you mean to tell me that you would put everything off for a bit of a foolish scruple? What would your mother say, and all our friends? Surely," he went on, with a touch of irritation, "I know my own father and what he would have wished as well as you and Agatha!"

"Agatha!" She caught at the name. "Then she feels just as I do?"

"She lives alone so much that she gets all sorts of whimsies into her head."

"But this isn't a whimsy." Joan spoke with sorrowful firmness. "You're not like yourself, Humphrey! Right-thinking folks would say just what she does." She had taken her stand.

"Right-thinking folks!" The horse-shoe rose

livid white on his forehead. "You are very polite, I'm sure. It's a pity that I happen to care so much about the marriage, since it matters so little to you."

The Stansfelds were of a ready and mettlesome temper; and at the moment Humphrey was nearly beside himself with disappointment, and with the sting of his own conviction which echoed the girl's words.

Her pride rose, but she made a great effort to repress it.

"It is not for me to say what it is to me, when you speak in that way. But I should never forgive myself if I agreed with you now. O, Humphrey!" she cried, hotly, "it can't be you who would wish it!"

To the right a leafy lane wandered steeply down through the meadows to the river. The brightening sky had changed its yellowing leaves to gold; it was against this background that Joan's beautiful girlish head lifted itself proudly, her face pale and her eyes burning with a grieved indignation. Her hood had fallen back, and the mist drops glittered on the

waves of her hair. The damp haze which had fled before the sun from the visible world had settled upon her soul.

Humphrey looked at her, dark and angry—the white mark terribly clear. In him there was a wild desire to wreak upon someone his sickening sense of frustration, and his anger included Joan.

Both were proud, both were conscious of disappointment in the other.

He replied to her with a studied coldness. "Well, if it's put off, no one knows what may happen. That thought won't trouble you much, I daresay." He took care to look away, that he might not see the pain that in his inner self he knew he was giving.

A creeping desolation seemed to clog the working of her heart. But it is in these crises of life that the possibilities of character come to birth. Those who knew her had never sounded the depths of her true and rich nature. The "vision" which that morning revealed itself, making its demand when all that was gayest and most irresponsible in her was at

play with life, found the young spirit ready, if dismayed.

Faithful to it, she was faithful to her love.

Out of the quick trouble, and the sudden pitiful comprehension which dawned upon her she spoke, and her eye did not shrink from his.

"I would rather give you up than shame you." She found it difficult to steady her voice, and for an instant put her hand before her face. The pure gleam of pearls was not lost on Humphrey; his set lip trembled.

She looked at him again, standing there, beautiful as the angel of his race.

"What do a few months matter for you and me? No one can part us! We could wait years if it had to be. No one *can* part us!" she cried again, dwelling on the words. "O, it would be far easier to die than to disgrace you. Humphrey!"

It was a last call. There was some quick responsive change in his face. He took a stride forward, the tides of love welling up over the striving misery, and held her in his arms.

There was a broken word of endearment, and

this brave Alruna-woman, a minute before so tall, high-hearted and indomitable, clung to him with a sob, like a little child.

It was thus my cousin, Joan Seaton, saved the Stansfelds' honour, and the honour of the Seatons too, as I take it. It was so that she opened to Humphrey the shining stairway which leads poor human love to heavenlier heights.

Humphrey had not deceived himself with regard to Mrs Seaton's reception of the news. She positively refused to be bound by their decision. For a little while her staggered brain appeared to imagine that it only needed the application of her own will to accomplish her heart's desire. Bride and bridegroom were flesh and blood puppets whom she dared to rebel.

But when she found that the two were as one in their resolution, she descended for the first time in her life to entreaty. She laid before them in her clever, incisive way all the inconveniences; and, above all, the talk and gossip of the dale, painting it in more startling colours than Humphrey's worst fears had done.

It was Joan's turn to be astonished. She was

prepared to bear the brunt of her mother's attack, to be as a shield for the man she loved. But it was Humphrey, not Joan, who decisively, and with patient dignity, met his cousin Judith's onslaught. That he suffered was evident, but no pressure on the wound, however ingenious, shook him in the least from his position.

Mr Seaton, who had had a severe attack of gout, and was still in his room upstairs, did his very best to appear sympathetic; but throughout his attempts at consolation his frank delight was eloquent in his face. Joan would be with him, his joy and his companion a little longer. He prolonged the respite indefinitely in his mind. He was so unfeignedly astonished at his wife's distress that she was obliged to restrain herself and retreat.

The old saying, "What's put off is oft done wi'," might echo in her head, but after Mr Seaton spoke, she relinquished the attack.

"There's no other way for them, Judith," he said; "there's no other road out of it. They must wait."

He could well understand the disappointment

of the young couple, but no conceivable conditions could have suggested any other course to him. And under his candid gaze, full of bitterness as she was, Mrs Seaton felt a temporary shame.

That night she did not say her prayers; she was filled with resentment. To her the Almighty was as a wayfarer in the land, directing a judgment or dealing a bounty as He journeyed through the universe, with little fatherly solicitude for the creatures He had made.

To her husband He was the dear Master of the House of Life, ever accessible, and breaking with His own hands the daily bread.

The day's events had affected Humphrey most of all. Though he was not a conceited man, he had a strong pride, and this pride had sustained a heavy fall. But for the revelation of Joan's heart, and the reflection that *she* was the victor in the struggle, he could scarcely have endured the consciousness that he had been on the brink of a dishonourable action—that he had in intention been guilty of it. He must perforce have hardened his heart.

But Joan, with that bountiful sympathy of love that lay deep within her, had foreseen this hour of self-disgust and humiliation. Into his hand at parting she slipped a folded paper. There was little light on his homeward path, for the fog had closed upon the dale; and physically and spiritually he plodded through a damp thick air, smarting under an increasing sense of unworthiness. Immediately on reaching home he unfolded the note by the light of the hall lamp. It was very short. "I know how hard it was, Humphrey, dear. I felt it too, there were so many things to be anxious about. Do you know, for a little while I wished it was right to do wrong! But I think God will forgive us. Always your Joan."

"Us!" There was a sharp prick of tears in his eyes as he kissed the pitiful words. He well understood. She would not separate herself from him, nor let him stand at the bar of his conscience alone.

CHAPTER VIII

THE DELAYED NEWSPAPER

THE next day being market-day, Mrs Seaton had resolved to use it to the best advantage in several ways.

There was the newspaper, with its news of the far East, to fetch ; there was her last winter's dress to be rearranged, and she never left anything to the dressmaker's unaided taste. There were several pounds of honey set apart for Joan, but now destined for Fors market. Mr Seaton, too, wanted news of a colt sent over in the spring to his good Quaker friend in Ribbledale, Joshua Bentley. But the chief thought in her mind was that on market-day it would be easiest to prepare the dale for the postponement of the wedding.

This consideration made her regard her husband's attack and Joan's necessary attendance on him, as a real providence.

Nat should drive her in by ten o'clock. She would finish her business early, going where she wished without question, saying what she had to say in her own way, calling on Mrs Dan Stansfeld whom no wise person neglected, and get back again before dark.

As she took her seat by Nat, handsome and erect in her furred cloak, she was conscious of a springing elation in spite of her disappointment, the elation of a general who has a difficult campaign before him ; but who believes in his own ability and good luck. She had managed the dale before.

The day was mild, and the grey's pleasant trot soothed her. She recognised with a bitter-sweet satisfaction the strong mutual love of the young people, which bade fair to wear well through the ups and downs of life. Her mind was still occupied with the Friday's events, and they held her silent. Nat regarded this unusual silence with suspicion. His mistress was not a great talker ; but on the occasions when he drove her she had usually a good many observations to make. It was his experience that her silences

boded him no good. He had known some unwelcome changes in the farmyard as a result of them.

"An' t' last time," he said to himself, "she ordered a gurt weshin' o' bed-lappings an' mäade me help wi' t' wringing, a queer soort o' wark for a mon! If it's t' saäme ageän, Ah'll have nowt to do wi't. Ah'll shift first."

As the little town came in sight, guarded by the three high, bold Fells, Nat's apprehensions were removed. Mrs Seaton suddenly spoke to him in her ordinary every-day tone.

"Put me down at the 'Bull,' Mrs Cockburn's sure to take the honey, and I shall not want you again till three o'clock. Be sure you see him properly cooled down, and don't let the stable-lads cheat him of his feed."

This was a time-honoured caution of Mrs Seaton's, no longer much regarded by herself or Nat. There was a time when it injured his feelings, but that day had passed with his teens.

"I thowt we sud keep wer best honey for Miss Joan," he was emboldened to say. "There

was summat wrang wi' t' bees till Thurstane, this year."

Mrs Seaton started; she turned to him in quick annoyance.

"Do you suppose Miss Joan wants to dive in honey? It would be best for some people to get their brains washed. What did Sally say a fortnight ago, and you standing in the doorway? Wasn't she keeping her best honey for Thurstane?"

Her manner awakened a very lively resentment in him; he had not yet forgiven her censure of Martha. He remembered that she had given Sally to understand that the honey would not be needed—that she herself had more than enough—and that Sally had been distinctly offended.

When Mrs Seaton had alighted at the inn-door, and had disappeared within carrying the jar of honey, he gave a sharp tug to the grey's reins, and muttered angrily, "Dang it!" as the horse moved slowly away.

All through the day his mistress's career was triumphant. Her news quickly spread. True,

as she said to herself, she had only men to deal with. But it was a good beginning, and before next market day the tale would be getting old for telling. The blame of the delay was thrown upon her husband's tiresome illness, and his need of Joan,—Joan was “so taken up with her father that she would rather lose her head than leave him just now.” It was a pity about the banns, very inconvenient for poor Humphrey altogether; but he was young enough to wait, surely. And when illness comes, why, everything has to give way. “We’ve but one daughter, and Kirster far away,” she said.

It was a most natural explanation. To a man the men sympathised with the father. The young ones may have thought it rather hard on Humphrey, who had got everything ready for his bride; but after all fortune had been only too favourable in giving him Joan, and making him heir to Thurstane. They were not altogether sorry that he should find one obstacle in his easy path. Ralph Pigot, who was in the bar-parlour when the news was brought, astonished the company by his un-

usual jollity and good humour, and drank and sang as in earlier days.

The only person not quite satisfactory was the dressmaker. Her sympathy was guarded, and her rejoinders to Mrs Seaton lacked enthusiasm. But it is difficult to be sympathetic with a mouthful of pins; besides, the last part of the order was postponed, and an order delayed is sometimes an order countermanded.

Mrs Seaton was now longing for the arrival of the delayed newspapers, which were unusually late. Cheered by her success and the hearty pleasantness of friends, she could afford to let her mind dwell on Kirster. She had never had any fear for him. India was sure to be the scene of his yet further promotion; still, a slight wound was possible to the luckiest, and she craved for news.

She went into the warm inn-parlour to wait for the papers and the dog-cart. There was a market-day atmosphere all through the inn, an atmosphere compounded of the smell of beer, spirits, and tobacco, and a thin fume of hot tea.

She distinguished this last with a sigh. She was tempted to pass by Mrs Dan, and have a cup of the strong, reviving liquid for which the Black Bull was famous, and she began to feel tired.

"Judith! Judith Seaton!" A genial voice came from the half-screened fireplace. A stout elderly man, in a plain, collarless brown coat and drab gaiters advanced eagerly to meet her, his honest grey eyes brightening. "How art thee, Judith? And Anthony—poorly, Ralph Pigot tells me, a bad touch of his old enemy! Well, well, we're getting into years, Anthony and me—but years don't seem to touch thee, Judith." He shook her hand again, looking with great friendliness into the clear-cut face, to which excitement had lent a fine colour.

Mrs Seaton had a strong liking for the kind Quaker. "Joshua Bentley," she said, "was good as gold, but his head didn't wobble as some pious folk's did;" and he and his sweet wife thoroughly appreciated her ability and good sense.

"Thee'll have a cup of tea, Judith," he said,

pointing to a small table spread with bread and butter and half-a-dozen sorts of cake—a glass dish of honey in the middle—honey at once recognised by Mrs Seaton.

She demurred, but he would not listen.

“Nay, it will breed a difference between me and Mary if she hears that I took mine alone and thee sitting by!” He drew a chair to the tray-side of the little table; Mrs Seaton let herself be persuaded; she thrust away the thought of Mrs Dan.

“Well,” she rejoined, sitting down and taking the teapot in her hand, “it’s very kind of you, Joshua, and I don’t deny that a cup will be welcome.” Then there was Anthony’s message to give about the colt, of which Mr Bentley gave a pleasantly favourable account, sure to cheer Anthony.

“Ralph tells me you’re going to keep Joan a few months longer, and a good thing too,” said her friend, passing his cup to her. “She’s not twenty-two, is she?”

“Twenty-one in June; young enough to take such a responsibility as Thurstane,” answered

Mrs Seaton, pinning back her velvet bonnet-strings.

"If she were mine," he said wistfully, thinking of the green plot round the Friends' Meeting-house at Hornaby, where his children slept under the snowdrops, "I should want her a few years yet. Ah! I should be clever at excuses for keeping her; never a lad living would match me there."

"Humphrey's cared for her more than four years," said her mother, a little confused, "and Thurstane's always been a second home for Kirster and Joan."

"Ah, Kirster! Captain Kirster now!" the Quaker laughed. "Thee mustn't expect me to congratulate thee, Judith. I am a man of peace, and 'Resist not at all' is my motto. Thee knows that; we're far from blameless as regards India as it is. I've never rightly agreed with myself as regards Kirster; he's got a deal to answer for in seducing me and Mary from righteousness. Yes, he has," he went on, whimsically serious. "Here we are taking as warm an

interest in a young firebrand as if we weren't strict friends at all. It isn't right, Judith." He shook his head, delicately brushing the crumbs from his brown coat.

Mrs Seaton smiled contentedly, and poured herself out another cup. Things were looking much brighter. The events of the day had been very satisfactory. She no longer heard the old proverb running in her head, and, after all, a Christmas without Joan, and Anthony ill, would be dismal enough. She had never known him have so bad a touch of gout before.

Ann Cockburn's griddle-cake was buttered to perfection; she was glad she had accepted Joshua's invitation, and she could run up for a few minutes' chat with Mrs Dan on her way home.

Her mind reverted to Kirster. *There* was joy, *there* was gratification, and no alloy of disappointment.

A woman looked in with a friendly "Good-day" to Mr Bentley.

"Powder-blue," observed Mrs Seaton to herself, eyeing the new-comer's bonnet, her lips pursed in distaste.

Then Ann Cockburn rustled in, her best black silk stiff and shiny; she had a sheaf of newspapers in her hand, and her face was red and hot.

"Here, Mrs Seaton, here's yours! And here's yours, Mr Bentley." She laid them on the table and hastened away.

"I'll find it, and read you the news," said Mr Bentley, putting on his spectacles.

"Anthony thinks the rumour's false," said Mrs Seaton, folding her hands in her lap to listen; "there won't have been any fighting yet."

"Why, where is the news? The paper's all folded wrong. O, here it is! Two sets of telegrams! Yes, Delhi's taken; it's sooner than I expected"—there was a suppressed excitement in his voice—"King captured, September 21st."—"The same day as the 'Mell Feast,'" reflected his hearer.—"Oh! Princes slain by Hodson! Horrible! inhuman! it makes a Christian man shame. What can it mean?" He ran his eye down the page—"And a list of killed and wounded."

Mrs Seaton bent forward, her face tender with sympathy.

"Poor things! Poor things," she murmured. "Why, what's the matter, Joshua?" She spoke in real alarm.

The Quaker had risen from his chair, he was white to the lips, he looked at her with horrified pity and stretched out his hand to her across the table.

"Judith!" he gasped, "my dear old friend, thee must—"

"What!" she cried harshly, the quickness of her mind suddenly blunted.

His arm fell to his side. With a bursting sigh he said, "Kirster! O Judith, God help thee and Anthony, God comfort thee," he buried his face in his hands.

Mrs Seaton swayed and recovered herself. She groped on the floor at his side for the paper, and spread it carefully before her. Then she got out her spectacles, and put them on with steady fingers. He heard her read twice, in a quiet voice, "Major Turnbull, Captain Christopher Seaton," and he knew that she laid down her spectacles again, and sat down. It was not the Christian name, added probably

because of another Seaton, also an officer in the regiment, that alone convinced them of the truth. It was borne in upon them both, as he afterwards expressed it, that the tidings were true. He took his hand from his face ; she was looking at him. Her face was calm, but her eyes were as the eyes of a lost soul, full of infinite despair.

He dared not speak. He got the impression that her mind, released from its stupor, was working at lightning speed, its movement communicated an unrest to the air. Though she looked at him he was not sure that she saw him. He retired into his inner sanctuary and put her into the Eternal arms. Nat and the dog-cart rattled up to the door, and almost at the same moment the inn filled with farmers and drovers coming in for a parting "bite and sup;" several flocked into the room. The Quaker, wishing to screen her, placed his broad person between her and them. But she quietly rose, smoothed her hair, and slowly fastened her cloak.

"I'll be getting home, Joshua," she said, walking to the door.

"Nay, not alone!" he remonstrated, as she bid him good-bye when he had helped her into her seat.

"You are a good friend. I shall not forget it; but if you're the man I take you for, you'll let me go to him alone."

The grey, sober at all other times, was excited on market days. He was so eager to get away that Nat had a hard task to hold him.

There was nothing for the good man but to submit. He stood watching them as they sped down the road, wiping his tears away.

The grey went homeward spurred by pleasant anticipations. Not so Nat. His indignation had grown during the hours he had waited in Fors. It had been coming to a head all the summer, and he had decided to give his mistress a piece of his mind—not too large a piece, nor too highly seasoned, but enough to uphold his character as an independent Yorkshireman.

One of the farm-men at Thurstane had died. It was Nat's intention to apply for the place, and once settled, he intended to make quick

work of the "courting" so objected to by Mrs Seaton.

He had rehearsed his part, and the moment to begin had come. He did not look at his companion; not that he was afraid to meet the eye of any man or woman, only—he preferred to stare straight before him.

He braced his feet against the floor-boards.

"Ah've been turnin' things over i' my mind," he began, and stopped, hoping that she would make some inquiry which would "set his back up," and give him fire to proceed. He was determined that the matter should be carried through with spirit. But Mrs Seaton did not speak. She was very still, Nat all at once observed; he eyed her cautiously, and started.

She sat motionless, her hands laid palm outwards on the leathern apron. The long lace veil, thrown back, fell in heavy folds about a face that had grown small and of a transparent whiteness; and the dark hair, in which was scarcely a thread of grey, lay on its pallor like a band of jet. But shocking as the change was to Nat, it was the look in her eyes that held his

tongue. There was such a stir of agonised thought in their grey depths that he quailed before it, unimaginative peasant as he was.

"Sha's struck," he murmured to himself. "Whativer will t' Meästher saäy, an' Miss Joan?"

Again and again, as the miles passed, he glanced at her, until he was, as he said afterwards, "fair brusten wi' pity for her."

But Mrs Seaton scarcely knew that he was beside her. She had one over-mastering subject for her speeding thoughts—*Kirster*. His life passed before her from the time he lay on her proud young breast, the finest "lad barn" Sally had ever seen, to the moment she wept in his strong arms when she sent him to his death. Here was the stream he always fished, there was the little inn where he stayed when Baby Joan had scarlet fever, and there the rose-hedge, at the back of which she made him stand when she came twice a week to look at him. He was behind her and before her, on his pony, striding along with his gun over his shoulder—an infant in his short frock, a schoolboy, bright-eyed and lanky-limbed—a man, for size and height, only

equalled by his father. Here she groaned aloud.

The Ridder rose before her. Just there where its flank heaved into the sky, Kirster had often stood, joyously waving his cap to welcome his father and mother home on market-days.

"There's a frosty fleer i' t' sky," broke out poor Nat at last, making one supreme effort to end this terrible silence, so different from the silence of the out-going journey.

"It is a frost that will never thaw, world without end," came from the parched lips of the woman beside him.

"Eh dear! Eh dear! Sha's fair struck," he said again, miserably.

When Thurstane appeared, the current of Mrs Seaton's thoughts changed. It was now not only Kirster, but Agatha—Kirster's Agatha. She sat upright, simply from habit of body, but she swung to every motion of the trap; her strength was failing. Now the long ascent to Feldfoot was over, and the terrace road lengthened swiftly behind them under the homeward hurry of the horse. Here was the

minister's house—her lips moved—she was repeating his words: "The Stansfelds have the vision."

It was true, she herself had had it times without end, and had ignored it—her punishment had come. She moved wearily in her seat. They were now in the village street, and before her was the ivy-hung house where Anthony sat, suffering, and waiting for her. Martha stood at the door.

Nat drove carefully over the grass to the gate, and, leaping to the ground, threw the reins on the animal's back. Ordinarily Mrs Seaton jumped down, nimble as a girl; to-day she let herself be lifted, like a child. This last sign of change in her overcame Nat completely. Steadying her reverently in his arms, he cried: "Eh! mistress, we wadn't leäve you for nowt.¹ Ah wadn't gan if t' Queen wer to mak' me heeäd coachman. Neä, not if t' angels axed me! You can deeäve² wer ears fra morn till neet if it pleeäse you. Martha and me'll niver flit. But deeänt look i' that wa-äy, deeänt!"

¹ nowt—nothing.

² deeäve—deafen.

She let her eyes rest on him, gentle and perplexed.

"What is it, Nat? O yes, you and Martha; of course you will stay, you have always been a good lad."

She opened the gate slowly. Nat sighed heavily; he shook his head sorrowfully at Martha.

"Neä," he said, "that's warse nor anything! Ah cud wish sha'd up an' banged my heeäd."

The same mildness troubled Martha, who waited to tell her that Joan was sitting with Jane Caley until her parents returned from Fors.

"It's quite right, Martha," said the woful mistress, painfully climbing the stairs, "let her stay. I am going up to your master." At the door of the bedroom she paused, as if to get her breath.

Mr Seaton stood by the window, leaning on his stick. The acute stage of the gouty fit had passed, and as he watched the yellow leaves swirling in Bjorn's Garth, where the wind was playing, he hungered for the open air. The knowledge that Joan would still be with him

stirred, spring-like, about his heart—it was difficult to believe that winter was at hand. Kransu ran past with Sally far in his rear; she recognised the figure at the window, and waved her short arm delightedly. Then the door opened and his wife came in. He turned himself carefully round, his eyes, vivid blue—Kirster's eyes—beamed a welcome. Before their expression had time to change Judith Seaton ran forward and fell on her knees, wringing her hands.

“Delhi's taken, and Kirster's dead,” she cried aloud. “Oh, my man! He's taken Kirster to punish me, and my sin's punished thee!”

“Kirster!” he echoed, heavily, looking down at the figure sinking under her burden to the floor.

In spite of the shock, his quick love almost instantly comprehended; his son was dead, and his wife lay broken at his feet. Her words—what were words at such a time! He sank into the chair beside her, unconscious of the stabbing pain in his foot, and, stooping down, gathered her to his breast.

CHAPTER IX

AGATHA

THERE was not a house that did not mourn in Parsifal. Before noon the next day the air trembled with the name of Kirster and words of pity for the bereaved. The farm-work was forsaken, and the village street was full of mournful groups. The old gathered at the fireside and added memory to memory of his kindness and his boyish mischief. There was in them a vague surprise, as they warmed their wrinkled hands, that Death should have taken one so light-burdened with years and passed them by. The young ones outside reminded each other of his strength and his friendliness. Again and again, as the hours wore on, they walked to the far side of the chapel garth to look once more at a wooden stump which commemorated his amazing cast of a stone, when the lads of Yorely pitted themselves against the lads

of Hornaby and Parsifal. Several of them had remembrances of him given when he left for the East ; and Sammy, the postman and barber, showed with sad pride a glass marble which Kirster had bestowed upon him when a little boy, as a generous compensation for breaking his razor.

Nat's prophecy had come true. The pools of the road were iced over, and a keen wind from the north closed all the doors. The blackbirds—Parsifal abounds with them—were busy in the elm-tree close, turning over the frosted leaves with their beaks, intent on the worms beneath.

Humphrey had been seen coming into Parsifal before breakfast time ; and later in the morning the Coverley carriage had stopped at the Seatons' gate, and the old earl himself had beckoned Sammy who stood a loving sentinel at the gate, to the carriage door, and left a very feeling message for the family.

Humphrey and Joan had been at the window and once in the garden, but of Mr and Mrs Seaton there was no sign. " They were as well as could be expected," Sally told the sympa-

thisers who came to the back door, Sally herself shaken with sorrow for the loss of her idolised nursling.

There was, to the minds of Parsifal folk, a great indelicacy in obtruding themselves at the front of the house, but it was thought possible to call at the back door and inquire for the mourners, because it could be approached through a covered passage.

"As well as could be expected," Mrs Seaton heard Sally say, and a strange wan spectre of a smile troubled the corners of her mouth. "If that was true," she thought, "I should be lying in my shroud."

There had been no sleep for her or for her husband. She persuaded him to lie down, and covered him up warmly. At intervals she fed the fire, and lighted a new candle; but only for this did she leave the low chintz-covered stool by the bedside. She sat there bowed and still, within reach of his compassionate hand, her strained gaze fixed upon the floor. She had entreated him not to speak to her, but she was conscious of his accompanying tender-

ness. She knew, too, that he was staying himself upon his God. As for herself, she spent the first hours of the night in following back the years. At last she came back to Agatha. It was then that a new Kirster stood at her right hand, a Kirster clad in an immortal and terrible beauty, holding above him a lamp kindled at the Light divine, in the rays of which every plausible deviation from the white track of vision lay plain. Her long meditation was repeatedly broken by a new stound of agony, as she recognised afresh that his one trouble, his absence, and his death, were all of her working. And she was his mother, and he was her only son.

But for that, that lie—the proud spirit writhed—he would have been at home, living and glad, and Agatha, poor Agatha of the broken heart—his proud and happy wife.

At the turn of the night she came to a decision. Anthony should know the whole ignominious tale; Agatha must know it too. Perhaps when Kirster's love was made clear to her the reproach would begin to fade out of his

eyes. She had at that moment in her pocket a letter of a week old, a few sentences of which had given her a very disagreeable uneasiness—now she closed her hand upon it as upon a treasure which might take wing. And with some faltering, but with no tears, she began her confession, always staring dully at the floor.

It spoke volumes for Mr Seaton's life-long affection that no slightest fear of injuring it was added to the turmoil of her mind. Joan, Agatha, Humphrey, they for the future could only give her at best a pity born of kinship. If the dale were to hear of her treachery to her own lad, she could foresee the crumbling of that high edifice of honour and respect in which she had lived for so many years. She cheated herself with no delusions.

God was alienated, and Kirster; but the fear that her husband's love might lessen was not added to her load.

What Mr Seaton felt of misery or disillusionment during the recital no one ever knew. But the result of it, apparent during the next few

days, as he more clearly understood the story, was a certain change in their relations.

Up to this time his love had manifested itself in a constant and delighted admiration of her. Her cleverness, her practical good sense, added to the dark, brilliant beauty which to him no passage of the years had dimmed, seemed to place him at her feet. Perhaps, the fact that he had not been able to give her the position which she would have enjoyed and adorned, deepened his humility.

He had occasionally recognised that his ideals were not hers, but he refused to examine the cause of the difference. She was his wife—the cleverest, the brightest, the bonniest woman in Askedale. If there was any dissimilarity in motive or tendency, it was not for him to dwell upon it.

But in the light of this grief, with the past spread before him by herself, he would no longer blind his eyes. The lower was not the upper path, and it was the lower which she had chosen. He knew enough of the skyward road, its gleams of the eternal, its heavenly consolations, to burn

with an intensity of sorrow that she had not shared them. And in his large humility he took blame to himself. He had, he assured himself, been a coward satisfied with his own experiences, when a braver spirit would have brought her into the joy of them, treading each step of the way with her, and conquering the ambushed enemies for both.

One thing I know, that whatever change took place in him, the quality of his affection was not weakened.

At mid-day one of Agatha's two maids came to say that her young mistress was in great need of Sally. She had had a fainting fit, and was very weak and ill. Sally was away almost before the message was delivered, and a few minutes afterwards Mrs Seaton asked Humphrey to stay with Joan—she herself would go to Agatha.

So it was that Parsifal, standing reverently aloof, saw the dogcart brought to the door by Nat, and Mrs Seaton led down to the gate by her still lame husband. Humphrey entreated to be allowed to drive her, and begged the

elder man to go back into the warm house, but he refused.

"Lad," he said, gently, "your place is with her," pointing to Joan, "and mine is with her mother."

As he spoke, Joan and Humphrey were struck by a certain sad dignity in him, a grave strength. He looked back at them as he drove away. A glow of fatherly pity softened his large eyes hollowed by grief and sleeplessness, as he saw them standing there, their young faces worn and pale. Humphrey had lost his best, his boyhood's friend. He had learned his sister's secret from her agonised outcry when he brought her the news, and he was sore with trouble. Poor Joan was in a confusion of sorrow; Kirster's death was incredible to her, and her idea of him was inconsistent with death. To her he was the type of strength and abounding health. She absolutely could not believe that the brother of her love and child-like worship was numbered with the dead. Then there was Agatha and her pain, and this strange, unfamiliar mother who had changed her personality in a night-time!

But for Humphrey's near presence Joan would have been lost in a mournful bewilderment, the consciousness that they were as one in this bereavement was as a cheering solitary star. She eased herself by constant and unobtrusive attentions to her fellow-sufferers, and from time to time upbraided herself for the gleams of joy which stole upon this world of sorrowful dream and change.

There was little said by the husband and wife. The sun was bright, and the north wind, if keen, was exhilarating ; but if Mrs Seaton had been conscious of the day at all, she would have said with the ancient skald,

“Swart grows the sunshine, and no summer after ;
All the winds are death-winds.”

The robins sang on the hazel sprays as they went carefully down Feldfoot hill, but for once Mr Seaton did not hear them. He was occupied entirely with the poor wife at his side and the ordeal before her. Kister he had laid away in the sacred place of his soul. Years ago when the midsummer sun blazed down he had often carried him, sleeping, in one powerful arm, as he walked backwards and forwards amongst his

mowers, one hand free for any business. So he carried him now. Afterwards, there would be the rest of life for mourning.

Mr Metcalfe had been vaguely uneasy for his friend. He thought that there would have been some word or sign of anxiety for Kirster's soul. The good minister had been most of the night wrestling in prayer; he yearned for some assurance of his favourite's salvation. Not so the father. In theory he held the same doctrines as his friend, but out of them he distilled a heavenly sweetness.

"I gave him to God at his birth, and I have renewed the gift every day and every night. I never thought of doubting the Almighty. I know that He has been faithful," he assured Mr Metcalfe; "I know it by my peace of mind."

And seeing the light in his face, the other forebore to press the question.

Mr Seaton had intended to be present at the interview with Agatha. But when they were over the river, and whilst the grey who always expected to stand and recover himself after the

perilous crossing, waited on the bank, Mrs Seaton touched his sleeve.

"Put me down here," she said ; "let me go up the fields alone."

Was she mindful of that other day ?

"Nay, you have no strength, Judith."

"I have strength for what's before me, Anthony, and I want to see Agatha alone, too."

She let herself stiffly down from the high seat. "Do you, Judith?" he asked, smiling at her pitifully. "Well, dear lass, it shall be as you wish. I shall not be far off."

She nodded, and began her climb. It was the dreariest time of the year, but the winter sun whitened the walls of the ancient hall, striving to hide the signs of age which were not now covered by leaf and blossom. The hill behind, named by the old settlers "hill of flowers," was brown and bare, but to Mrs Seaton's inner eyes four laughing girls and boys were charging down its slope, to fall a merry heap at the bottom. When she reached the courtyard both doors were locked ; it was Sally who at last let her in at

the porch. "Sha's asleep," she said, "but sha'll be rare and glad to see you, power¹ barn!"

The touch of Sally's rough hands and the sound of her homely speech threatened to shatter Mrs Seaton's self-control.

"Ah got her to tak' a drink o' my kill-wae; it's naught but yarbs, but it's grand for sleep. Sha'll be more nat'ral when she wakkens up, pleäse God and t' gude 'uns!"

The old woman saw the mother's emotion, so sternly repressed, and talked on to give her time.

At the foot of the newel staircase she said briefly: "Sha's in t' lile chamber, t' chamber royal," and began to ascend.

"Oh!" ejaculated Mrs Seaton, so sharply that Sally called out, "Tak care, fallin's easy."

But Mrs Seaton was only remembering afresh that other afternoon.

"She would lig here," said Sally, with a smothered sigh; "it's here they were so oft togither. Ah've fund 'em mony's the time, her readin' in a small barn-like voice, an' him o' t' floor, makin' of his niff-naffs.² An' now!"

¹ *power*, sometimes *puir*—poor.

² *niff-naffs*—playthings.

Mrs Seaton trembled. "Eh, Ah nursed him, he were t' grandest barn i' England, and grew to be t' grandest mon. Ah nursed him—" the old woman's voice failed her. Never in her life had she been so moved.

"You did, you did, Sally." Mrs Seaton suddenly bent forward and kissed her, and Sally wept aloud.

Against the carved black head-board of the queen's bed Agatha's face was white as the linen above her. As Mrs Seaton stood and looked at her, a tear rolled slowly down her cheek. She motioned to Sally to close the door, and sank down at the foot of the bed in her lowly position of the night before. It seemed as if only so could she endure to the end.

The room grew lighter as the sun brightened to his setting, and Agatha, disturbed, moved her head restlessly.

"Kirster," she moaned. With a sobbing sigh she sat up in her bed, pushing back the masses of her hair. She did not immediately recognise the figure on the floor, whose face was now hidden in the counterpane.

But recognition came with a bound of pity. It was her cousin Judith. Alas! poor mother!

"Cousin Judith, dear Cousin Judith!" The voice was "small and barn-like" through weakness, even as the voice Sally remembered. She fell back against the pillow, and Mrs Seaton, roused more by the movement than the words, rose to her feet.

Agatha held out her arms, her eyes full of unutterable sympathy and affection, but the other stepped back to the bottom of the bed. She met the girl's surprised gaze with one of forlorn humility, and stood there like some sorrowful captive at the conqueror's feet, dignified though fallen.

"Dear Cousin Judith," repeated the girl, leaning forward to reach her.

"No, Agatha," said Mrs Seaton, with slow distinctness. "I have been a cruel woman, a cruel mother to Kirster, and a traitor to you. It is too late to be anything else, but you shall at least hearken—"

"You don't know what you're saying," interrupted the girl, feverishly. "O, if I could get

up, but my head goes round so. Do come and rest here, here on my shoulder, and let me try to comfort you."

"I know quite well what I am saying," said the elder woman solemnly. "When you were a little girl, Agatha, you were very obedient, be so now, my dear. Listen to me; it won't be for long, and I will not vex you afterwards with the sight of me."

Agatha looked at her with fear. What had grief done to the strong, quick brain? Ah, it was surely natural, such a grief! She pressed the sheet against her lips that a moan might not further excite his mother.

But Mrs Seaton showed no trace of excitement. Her tone was quiet and her eye steady.

"You remember my coming to see you one afternoon four years ago." Agatha winced. "Yes, you can never forget it. I told you Kirster loved Emily Howden,—it was a lie. Many a time I've told you how he would be bringing home some rich wife, and how he was all taken up with the life out there,—that, too, was a lie."

"A lie!"

"Yes;" Mrs Seaton pronounced the words in a full strong way that brought the listener's blood to her cheeks, and a kind of conviction to her mind of her cousin's complete sanity.

"It was all a lie; I wanted a rich daughter-in-law who would set the Seatons forward, and I knew he had a fancy for you. I told him,—I deceived him, too, about you, Agatha."

The dark pupil of Agatha's eye dilated. "About me!" she exclaimed, indignantly.

Mrs Seaton took no heed of the exclamation, she was bent on her atonement. "He loved you all the time," she said; "he loved you when you were but a baby, and he never changed, no, not up to the day he—" she could not form the word. "Yes, Kirster was always true!" the mother-heart broke through the studied quiet of her manner.

There was no word from Agatha. She lay on her pillows, a dawning joy and wonder in her eyes. Mrs Seaton came nearer, and laid something lingeringly on the bed.

"It's his last letter," she said, "and you can keep it"—then she bowed her head on her

breast—"but for me, Agatha, you would be man and wife, and Anthony would have had his lad." She put herself out of consideration.

Agatha mechanically took up the letter. Her heart beat so violently that she could scarcely breathe. On the folded paper the black vigorous handwriting was clear even to her swimming gaze.

"I shall love Agatha to the end, mother. We have not spoken of this before, but if things go badly with me—not that I expect anything of the kind—tell her so from me. I have lately hoped—"

She read no further. This was his writing, those were his very words. There fell away from her the secret burden of years.

"He loved me to the end," she murmured softly. "O, how wonderful God is!" There was no sting in his death at that moment. Death was a name for a closer union, for a beautiful revelation. And if it were true that he had cared so much, what of the years of missing and of suffering? What of the hours when her pride became her scornful accuser,

and had no pity when she writhed under the accusation. "He had loved you all the time." O, the unspeakable joy of it.

She rested for a while, overcome by weakness, letting the blessed truth sink into her heart. In the dusk and the stillness it all became plainer, and those mysterious confessions of Mrs Seaton's were sufficiently intelligible to show her that she and Kirster had been separated by her cousin Judith.

There had been many saints in the Stansfeld family, but never one whose crowning halo was not the price of battle or of pain. And this girl's own patience and charity were the result of a four years' tribulation.

The angels of heaven had for long been busy with Agatha. In the solemn hours between the night and the morning, in her lonely walks among the hills, they had been drawing out the sting of pride. They knew much of love, living in the land of love, and they whispered to her that an unselfish and unobtruded affection, however deep and lasting, was no shame to a modest maiden. A pure love is above criticism,

it belongs to a perfected state. And when pride's sting was drawn, her affection for Kirster flowed out to those about her. His family, and those in the midst of whom his youth had been spent, began to have a new claim upon her. Her one solace in her constant trouble was to help those whom he had known. The angels had done Agatha good service, they stood at her side now.

Her eyes sought the motionless figure at the foot of the bed. Mrs Seaton scarcely noticed the passing time. She waited for the overflowing of Agatha's anger and indignation. She was not surprised that it was too great for immediate words. In imagination she had already heard them. She well knew with what fiery and inexorable resentment she herself would have received the confession of one who had stood between herself and Anthony. It was just, too, that Agatha, always so submissive to her opinions, and so proud of her resemblance to her, should now be her judge.

There was a hesitating movement in the bed, and a soft thud upon the floor. Mrs Seaton

started. Was Agatha coming with her denunciations? The faltering bare feet halted, there was a timid touch of a hot hand upon her own. She lifted her haggard eyes, and instantly the girl's arms were about her neck, her tears upon her cheek.

She shrank from her embrace, but Agatha held her with all her strength.

"Kirster's mother!" she whispered. "Nothing matters if he loves me! Kirster's mother and *mine*!"

"O, my God!" cried Mrs Seaton, hoarsely. "Nay, take your arms away, child—don't kiss me, I cannot bear it."

"Take me, *quick*," breathed Agatha, tottering.

They were the words which she always used when, as a frightened child she was afraid of falling, unable to endure the giddy heights where her strong-nerved companions led her. They brought her childhood back to Mrs Seaton—the motherless childhood.

"Take me, quick." Mrs Seaton caught her and laid her on the bed, and Agatha, worn out with suffering and excitement, nestled to

her side, and laid her head upon her breast, murmuring again, "Kirster's mother, and *mine*."

Nor when she awoke could she bear her out of her sight. During the weeks of illness, never was invalid nursed so well, with such humble service and such amazing forethought. Mrs Seaton was lost to everything but Agatha's weakness, and her husband was thankful that it should be so. To Humphrey and Joan her devotion was only another proof of the mother's good heart. Mr Seaton had made one stipulation with his wife—Joan and Humphrey were to remain ignorant of her share in the long separation.

"I am not saying that it would not be just if you had to bear their knowing of it," he said, in answer to her belief that she ought to shirk no additional bitterness which this might bring, "but it can never be right for children to despise their mother. Though they would be dutiful, aye, and, I believe, affectionate, Humphrey and Joan are not like Agatha."

Mr Seaton's way of treating the humiliated

woman—and Agatha's—would not have commended itself to the theories of Parsifal. But perhaps it agreed better with a higher counsel. On the anniversary of her boy's death she plunged her husband into a great and shocked astonishment. Resting her hand on his broad breast, and lifting her worn face to his, she said—

“Anthony, we don't need many words, we're not used to them. But I've had it in my mind a good while that I never got a sight of Christ and His love until I saw Him in you and Agatha.” She gently checked his protest by the pressure of her fingers. “You've taken it all in such a way that I sometimes begin to hope that He has had mercy on me, and will stoop to forgive, though I never can forgive myself.”

There was one incident in that sad day of days which Mrs Seaton never forgot. But as years went on, and as children of a new generation gathered about her knees, she would preface it, upon the rare occasions that she told the tale, with “Seeing isn't always believing,” fearing to frighten young minds, and herself doubting the

truth of it. She would explain that her own mind was so disturbed and over-wrought at the time that probably it deceived her. But the memory remained with her as one of the strange experiences of the sad yet wonderful day.

Her husband had gone home, filled with inexpressible gratitude, and she, uneasy at her patient's increasing fever and restlessness, went downstairs to send a man on horseback for Dr Williams; she had always upheld the young Welshman. Sally took her place at the bedside.

The great hall was dimly lit by a single candle and the darting flames of the newly-kindled fire. And one of the maids, full of sympathy, and impressed by her air of extreme fatigue, persuaded her to sit in the chimney corner until she brought her a cup of the coffee Sally had made for Mr Seaton, who could touch nothing.

Anxious now to keep well, so that she and she alone might nurse Agatha, Mrs Seaton sat down in the roomy chair, stretching her chilled hands to the blaze. She could not have described her feelings. A judgment had been

miraculously averted, and Agatha, now yet more miraculously her own child, had forgiven her. There was no room for more than this in her mind ; the rest was filled by the abiding anguish of her son's death.

She finished her coffee, and replaced her cup on the low oaken shelf at the fireside. As she rose to go upstairs again it seemed to her that a tall woman came down from the old daïs still remaining at the other end of the hall, where the musicians had played on the night of the mell supper, and passed on the other side of the candle to the tower door.

She was dressed in some long rich robe of black, and a veil fell about her shoulders from the peak of her pointed cap, where a jewel glittered. It was the gleam of this jewel which had first attracted Mrs Seaton, for there was no sound of feet nor of the trailing folds.

Fearful lest Agatha should be disturbed, Mrs Seaton ran to the bottom of the steps ; the stranger was already half-way up, and she hurried to overtake her. She followed her quickly through the cheese-room, trying to

intercept her, but it was not until she reached the door of the little chamber-royal that the woman stopped. Here, her fingers about the handle, she turned her head, looked at Mrs Seaton with a long, lamentable gaze, and vanished.

"She may have been a queen," thought Mrs Seaton, incapable this day of amazement, and all at once remembering the legend, "but it was one unhappy woman recognising another, queen or no queen."

And as she sat by the uneasy sleeper she realised as she had never done before that sorrow was a very ancient burden, borne at some time on the shoulders of every son and daughter of men.

CHAPTER X

MOLLY CROWTHER

SINCE January the new year had striven by its unusual mildness to make up for the unfriendliness of its forerunner. Old people, who were usually "sair putten aboot" in winter months, weary of the house imprisonment and too weakly to bear the cold out of doors, were creeping about the sunny lanes, greeting March and early April with gladness.

There had been no snow on the Ridder since the last week of December. The heather was springing fair, and the lapwings congratulated each other countless times a day on the favourable season for young families. Every year Joan paid them a visit; she knew the flat of the land where most of the nests lay, and she delighted in the stir made by her first approach. They came about her with a swoop and buffet of the wings, protesting, upbraiding, filling her

ears with the rush of their coming. But when they found her to be a harmless and to all appearance an incurious creature, they let her sit down upon a grass tussock, satisfying themselves by an occasional remonstrance, and working off their excitement in wide circles of flight.

She had chosen the tenth of April for her visit because it was Humphrey's birthday. In the old days it was the custom of the four, as children, to climb over the Ridder and make a bow to Hartswater, the lake in the valley on whose bank the first Humphrey Stansfeld lost his heart, and afterwards his life fighting for the lady of Ryedale.

Humphrey had promised to come with her to-day, but he had some arrangements to make for "young stock" in Ryedale, and had been obliged to ride over there yesterday afternoon. Through the heather, and over the moss, and up the grassy and stony steep she had climbed to the crown of the Ridder, and from the further side gazed down upon the silver shield of Hartswater. With her salutation to the lake she made a vow that Humphrey him-

self should stand there beside her next year, and plucked a yellow mountain pansy for a witness.

And now she was in the Bottoms, impelled by a desire to grasp the whole beauty of the dale, high and low. Her black dress was a blot upon the fresh brightness of the earth, but her beautiful face radiated a young delight more captivating than the joy of Spring.

Mr Metcalfe passed down the meadow, and seeing her rapt attitude he went by in silence, suddenly refreshed.

Her back was turned to the Scar. The hanging wood above her, a shimmer of young leaves, was alive with flying shadows. Like a flock of shy, wild creatures they flitted about, gleaming and darkening on the trunks of the trees. There was a film of faint blue where the forget-me-nots opened by the beck-side, and a yellowing sheen of daffodil-buds under the hedge. Everywhere around her stretched the meadows in the first ineffable green of the Spring.

Ah! she would have daffodils on the grass in the middle of the courtyard, and where the

brooklime purpled the well-head, forget-me-nots should be thickly planted. Kirster and Agatha dammed up the stream every year for many a year of childhood, and it had served a hundred of their romances; the forget-me-nots should bloom for the one that was left.

Joan had sometimes felt sore about Agatha. She had been accustomed to be first in her father's and mother's eyes, first in the home. Since her brother's death that place had been *Agatha's*. Mrs Seaton, though so actively interested in all Joan's preparations for her wedding in June, was diverted at any time by Agatha's coming; and any news of her, however trivial, drove everything else temporarily into the background. Joan was not loved less, but Agatha, it seemed, was loved more. In some moods her high spirit had resented the change. Even her father broke through the habit of years, if by doing so he could help Agatha.

Humphrey, quick to notice anything which concerned Joan, once remonstrated with Mr Seaton. He had not the courage to reproach Kirster's stricken mother.

It was on a Saturday evening, an evening held sacred to Joan by both parents from her babyhood, and her father, hearing that Agatha was kept away by a cold, prepared to ride over to Thurstane and bear her company.

"It isn't fair to rob this to pay *that*," said Humphrey, half playfully, but with intention, pointing over the dale.

Mr Seaton turned and looked at him, then he placed his hand on his daughter's head.

"*This* is my own," he said, "she knows nothing can change that. It can't be Joan who minds, and if she doesn't, don't you fashion to complain, my lad. She and her father were friends before your black head took up one of her thoughts."

His smile disarmed Humphrey, and his words consoled Joan—for the time.

But it was Agatha herself who wiled away jealousy. She was so unselfish, so sweet in her sorrow, and so outgoing in affection to her, that the wounds Parsifal made Thurstane healed. Since the confession of Mrs Seaton the stream of her life was no longer frost-bound; if its

course was still, it refreshed all the immediate surroundings. Her thoughts dwelt constantly with the living Kirster, waiting for her to the end, not with the dead soldier at the Cashmere Gate.

She had drawn unspeakable consolation from the knowledge that the day of the mell-supper had been his death-day—it was then that she experienced that new and vivid consciousness of his presence. Unhindered by the conditions of time and space and unfettered by the fleshly limitations, he had, she believed, sought the heart he loved. It was this faith which made her the recipient, as years passed, of the sad confidences of the young and bereaved, and which gave a tender, especial grace to her refusal of poor Denis Heseltine, who, in a few months' time, asked her to be his wife. It was this, she said to one who nursed her in her last illness, in the first years of middle life, that had kept her from reproaching Mrs Seaton, when the longing for his human presence overpowered her spiritual consciousness. Humphrey gained more than he knew by Agatha's pre-

eminence at Parsifal. It is probable it never occurred to him to ask why Joan drew daily closer to him. In his new humility he was often genuinely surprised at her confidence in him and her apparent forgetfulness of that wretched hour, the memory of which would never cease to stab. In a hundred ways Joan turned to him for sympathy and comprehension. There was a time when, to his perplexed dismay, the leaves of her heart's rose would abruptly curl and close, and the half-spoken confidence cease. Now there was something every day to hear—something of her thoughts, her fancies, her pleasures, and her plans. This insight and companionship further transformed his love for her.

Only yesterday he had brought a trouble into her candid eyes. It was as he said "Good-bye,"—he had come back for a last word.

"Do you know, darling, your looks are not so much to me as they once were," he said, laying his hand upon hers, which rested on the low gate between them. She was not vain, but she was inwardly proud of her lover's admira-

tion. She coloured and withdrew her hand. He hastened to explain.

"It's *yourself*, sweetheart, it's *yourself* I think most of now. Your looks fit you—you couldn't have any other face, it seems to me. But it is *you*, Joan, I want, and I want you every minute."

She thought of these words of his as she went slowly up to Parsifal, and looked round at Thurstane. It was too far to see the budding scarlet on its walls, but the soft veil of green behind was deepening every day.

"It won't be long now," she said aloud. Then, with a strange bound of thought, she remembered Ralph. Ralph had certainly felt the death of his old playmate; Kirster was the only boy, the only man he had ever respected. There was a family bond between himself and his father, but, at least on his side, it did not amount to affection. It was rather an exaggeration of that love of an old name, and consideration for those who wore it, which still characterises many in Askedale.

Kirster had been out of the reach of his

jealousy—he had been too big, too powerful, too kindly for Ralph to pit himself against. And of late years he had been too far away.

For weeks after the coming of the woful news Ralph had abstained from his covert persecution of Joan. He had also been away in Liverpool looking after some South American business for his uncle, and he was away still, people said. Only once in the last month had Joan met him, and though the sight of him always affected her uncomfortably, he had been more like the careless, good-natured friend of her childhood. The expression of his face on leaving was peculiar, but she had been so long relieved from discomfiting thoughts of him that she was willing to leave it amongst the many oddities which apparently made up his character.

If, owing to some latent kindness, he had really given up his tormenting pursuit of her, and altered his attitude towards Humphrey, she felt a warm rush of gratitude to that dear Kirster who had blessed her even in dying. It was in this frame of mind, melted with tender-

ness towards Kirster, and sensible of a new friendliness to Ralph, that she went up the fields, towards the garden-gate, listening to the blackbirds which haunted every copse. "*Every brake its bird, and every hill its stream,*" she hummed to herself.

Within the gate her flowers were growing fast. The sweet-rockets, great rosettes of leaves, with already an advancing stem of light-poised buds, and the patch of lupins covered with their delicate fans, brought before her mental sight one of the never-fading joys of her spring. For years she and Kirster had stood, half-an-hour at a time, watching the rising and falling cloud of white butterflies, wavering above the sweet-rockets. Sally told her they were the spirits of good flowers, and this had given to the homely, fragrant blossoms a lovely distinction of special goodness; they were the only plants honoured by the airy crowd.

The lupins lined the inside of the garden wall, and she saw, too, what the picture would be in a little while, the spires, white and blue

and of a purpling bloom, lifting themselves against the background of the dale, a fairy vision of colour and light. Once more she would have them for her own, and afterwards who would tend them but Agatha? The thought brought a sigh and a smile. She walked backwards up the garden and came in contact with something large and unyielding, which held her fast.

"Father!" she exclaimed. Mr Seaton used her shoulder as a stick.

"What were you thinking of?" he asked. "Looking at Thurstane? Thinking of Thurstane?" There was a hint of wistfulness in the words.

"Father, will you miss me? I sometimes think, when you have Agatha, I shall be nowhere with you and mother." The old wounded affection made itself heard again in the rich deep voice and wet eyes. They were walking past the water-butt, not clasped with nasturtiums now, but black and bare. Mr Seaton, like Humphrey, in the late summer, leaned against it, Joan standing before him, her lips quivering.

All the tenderness of the man's big heart shone in his eyes. So Joan had looked when, after some childish misdeed, she had begged to be forgiven; but now it was pain, not repentance, which brought the tears.

"Come," he said, and opened his arms. And Joan, lying on his breast, wrapped about with those loving arms, cried away the last bitter drop of her jealousy of Agatha. For years it was her way when tired or alone to go back to this moment—it awakened the heart of her childhood, and gave her rest.

After the early dinner, Joan said to her mother: "I feel so restless somehow to-day—the walk up the river hasn't taken it away. I can't sit still; isn't there something to fetch, or somebody to go and see. It must be the Spring in my bones."

"It doesn't happen to be because Humphrey is in Ribbledale?" asked the master of the house, between the puffs of his pipe.

"Now, father, Humphrey has been away before. No, it is the Spring wind setting everything on the dance."

"Not *this*," he said, whimsically eyeing his lame foot. "I'm afraid the sap's dried up here."

"You can take old Molly Crowther her tea and tobacco, if you want a walk," interposed Mrs Seaton, her still, transparent face bent over the skeins of thick wool on her lap.

"I'm afraid, at times," said her husband, "that we're throwing things away on Molly that ought to nourish other poor folks. Her grandsons can support her, and everybody that comes to the dales makes a journey to see her, and leaves her money or food. Lord Coverley told me that when his nephew was in Vienna last year, the first question the English Ambassador asked him was, "Is your place anywhere near Molly Crowther?"

"See, mother, what it is to be a hundred and six," said Joan.

Mrs Seaton considered a moment. "Shall I keep the things back, Anthony?" she asked, with her new gentleness.

"Nay, Judith, do as you think best; some poor body gets them, I don't doubt, if she can't manage them."

"It should have gone before, but I haven't felt like walking so far," said his wife.

The father and daughter looked at each other. It was not that Mrs Seaton was ill, blanched and thin as she had grown, but the quick life in her was maimed. Nothing of her duty was forgotten; she kept the reins of the household in her hands, but the brisk activity and ready speech were of the past. From Mr Seaton down to Martha every one would have welcomed a spurt of the old spirit, and it was a matter of self-congratulation to Nat that his suggestion of half-an-hour ago, "It's a bit like snow i' t' feel o' t' wind," kindled a spark of her old impatience.

"I would much rather stay with you, mother, than leave you alone," urged Joan. "Old Molly's a hundred and six, she can wait a bit longer for her 'bacca.' I expect she will live another twenty years. I wish you wouldn't do so much, mother. Isn't she pale?"

She appealed to Mr Seaton, but he only nodded, without reply—he knew his wife's dislike of being discussed.

"I'm quite well, child," Mrs Seaton said hastily, making an effort at cheerfulness, but the unappeasable hunger of her heart was visible in her eyes. "Go, it will do you good. I shall walk on with your father to see Passon Metcalfe; and there's that cough medicine to make for Martha. I don't like that peffing cough." She gathered up her skeins and rose.

"Very well, I will take Molly her tea, and, if I've time, I will bring you a bunch of those dear powdery flowers from the river bank. You used to be so fond of them, and so was ——" Joan halted, annoyed with herself.

"Yes, he always thought them like Agatha—*Quaker ladies* he called them."

As the mother passed, she pulled her daughter's head down and kissed her, conscious of her confusion. "Let us begin to talk of him, love, it will be a sort of ease to me; don't let us shut him out."

When the door was shut, Joan turned to her father. "How dreadfully gentle and quiet mother is. I am sure she is ill."

"Not in body, my dear lass"—something in his throat choked him—"be very good to your mother, Joan."

The wind was certainly colder as Joan set out for Yorely with her parcels. She had also much add to hold in her cloak, which swelled behind her like a sail.

But the sunlight was glorious, and her young blood raced with the wind. She was practical, in spite of her lively fancy, and she filled the distance between Parsifal-Dion and Yorely with plans for summer work in the old home and the new. It was a pleasant occupation—Humphrey came in at every turn !

The old town seemed to have travelled to meet her, so quickly did she come to the post-office. At the door of it stood the postmaster, ruddy and jovial, and a tall man with his hand on his hip leant against the door post. Ralph had come back !

He had so gay an air that Joan met him with winning kindness, resolved that nothing should be lacking on her part.

"Do you know how Molly is to-day?" she

asked the postmaster, after a welcoming word to the other.

"Terrable healthy this spring ; but for colour, Miss Seaton, she's pretty near as young as yourself. Mr Stansfeld, he met her t'other day, and gave her five shillin'. She's quite new made over again since then. She's that set up she telled every body in Yorely. He's off to Ribbledale, I hear !"

Joan's cheeks grew hot—they were red as the pyrus-japonica buds at Thurstane ; she felt Ralph's eyes, though she looked at the postmaster.

"Yes, he went yesterday. I didn't know you were home again, Ralph," she said pleasantly.

"Hoped I wasn't, eh !" he laughed, but Joan would not be annoyed. "Yes, here I am, but I am going off to Ribbledale, too. Father's got bad news of a two-year-old he lent a farmer there for the winter. One of Kate's foals—you haven't forgotten old Kate?" He whistled a bar of a waltz in his casual way.

"I should think I haven't. Do you remember how we all five rode her up from the Lower Garth

at your uncle's, and you tumbled back over her tail." Her sweet laugh rang out at the recollection. The post-office was also the chief shop—a customer here called for the postmaster.

"I don't forget much that happened," said Ralph, watching her with a bold admiration; "a fine bump I got. Do you see that white mark?" He lifted his hat and bent his head. "You liked me best then, Joan; Humphrey was off with Kirster most days in the week."

"You were always very good to me—I think everybody was. But now I must be getting away to old Molly Crowther, and back again home."

"It's years since I saw her myself. I'll go with you if you've no objection." He glanced keenly at her.

"No; why should I?" she said bravely, but her pulse quickened. There was always this uncomfortable fear of what he might say next. She noticed, too, the subdued flame of his eyes, and the reddened circles round them. "I am afraid he has been drinking again, in Liverpool," she said to herself.

The wind carried back her cloak as they crossed the street to the row of grey cottages, in one of which Molly lived, and he saw the curious ornament suspended from her neck—a golden bird holding an amethyst heart—Humphrey's gift, no doubt. His face blackened; he responded absently to her questions about his late doings, thinking of her, not of her words.

Molly's door was open, and the two entered after knocking repeatedly without effect. The old, old woman sat by the fireside, her short pipe upon the oven-top. The kitchen was large and airy, furnished in the usual substantial North-Riding fashion, and a great "creel" of oat-bread, from which depended strings of herbs and onions, hung down a foot or more from the ceiling above the hearth-stone. Her small figure bent towards the fire, and her face was hidden by a drawn-silk black bonnet. She made no movement as they came forward, and Joan's clear tones were not loud enough to reach her ancient ear. They waited, doubtful what to do. Then Ralph said, "Let me try."

"Grannie!" he cried. The strong ring of his

voice pierced her hearing. She turned her head, but it cost her an effort to pierce through the veil of a hundred years.

"Eh, dear! Eh, dear!" she exclaimed, as it were, seeing them at last. "An' have you been waitin'? T' lass as lives wiv me is oot in t' toon. Ah get dreeämin'-like nows an' thens, but Ah'm a vast deal wicker (livelier) nor my son Mat. He isn't over eighty, and he's gettin' ould an' dafflin' (imbecile)." She drew herself up stiffly; she felt she had been taken at a disadvantage. "Cum an' sit doon, both on you."

"Why, Molly, you know me," and Joan stooped down and laid her offerings on the old woman's knee. Molly thanked her, smelling the tea with great enjoyment, and fingering the tobacco. Soon she fixed an inquisitive eye on the girl, who had knelt down beside her with the light on her face. Ralph was still standing, his back to the window. The aged eyes, though deeply sunken, were as clear-blue as the eyes of a child, or of Mr Seaton, and every Sunday morning they read "a matter o' four verses" in

the heavy bible on the top of the chest of drawers—without spectacles.

There was nothing repulsive in the face ; the features were delicate still, and the cheeks, if wrinkled and fallen, had kept something of their youthful pink. The chief sign of age in Molly was the slow ordering of her faculties, but when once back from the far past she was ready-witted and intelligent. Her speech was that of my birth-place at its best, rich in vowel sounds, racy in expression, the words a close fit to the ideas. The strength of the north country is in it—the reserve and the passion. And in writing of my dale I am perpetually hindered from doing justice to its people, because in consideration of those who have the misfortune to be born out of it, I am forced to pare and impoverish its tongue.

“I am sure you know me,” said Joan, taking off her hat.

All the wrinkles curved into a smile. She raised her soft old hand and touched Joan’s forehead. “Seaton brow and Stansfeld een ! Whya, you’re Anthony Seaton’s dowter, for

sure you are ! The Seatons are foriver bonnie, ay, bonnie and good—all on 'em but Handsome Miles, he wer too bonnie to be good,—hair o' gowd, an' a silver tongue. Mony's the time Ah've left my wark to tak' care o' itself to see him walk through t' town. It's you that's to wed wi' young Stansfeld o' Thurstane. Ay, marry—Ah disn't forget. It cums back to me. The Stansfelds are straight (honest) and fine, t' maist on 'em. They see mair nor ithers, an' they hauld fast to their own. Ah hope Him 'at's above 'll bless you, both you an' him. It's varry cold," she broke off suddenly, "t' sun's shinin', but there's a creep i' my back-bone 'at oft meäns snaw."

"Snow !" laughed Ralph, with light scorn. "Age, you mean, Grannie, it's age that's giving you the creeps." He pulled a chair near to her and sat down.

"Who's *yon* ?" asked Molly imperatively of Joan, who had possessed herself of a wooden stool, "what do you call him ?" She peered up from the shade of her great bonnet. "He's no Stansfeld ; Ah can see that by t' mak' of him."

"Don't tell her, let her guess," whispered the girl. "Guess, Molly; you know everybody in the dale."

"Ay, Ah've kenned 'em all, ivery one on 'em for twenty mile round. But Ah mun see his face. Ah can mak' nought o' big shouthers and lang legs. Come hither, lad."

Ralph put himself at her side. Molly stared hard at him, taking in every feature of the handsome, passionate face. She tremblingly replaced her pipe, which she had been filling, upon the top of the oven, and regarded him searchingly.

"Well, you'll know me now, Grannie," he said jocosely, reseating himself.

The old woman turned to Joan. "What's he doin' here wiv you?" she asked quaveringly. "What is he to you, my barn?"

"A very old friend, Molly. Why, you know that, and we came together to bring you your tobacco. You're glad to see him, I'm sure."

Molly was silent, evidently anxious and disturbed.

"What's the matter with the old idiot," said Ralph, half aloud, irritated by her manner.

Her ears were quick to hear now. She sat erect in her arm-chair, a quiver passed over her face.

"Ah'm nae idiot," she said, with real dignity, "and t' mon belittles hisself who calls me so. Ah'm terrable old, an' Ah've seen a vast o' things. Ah ken a face *yet*, an' Ah ken 'at you're a Pigot, Marmaduke Pigot's son, an' t' son o' yon poor lily-lass, Ellen Heseltine. Ah ken a deeäl." She shook her head slowly from side to side.

"Don't be vexed with her, Ralph," entreated Joan under her breath, "think how old she is."

"She's old enough to be more civil," he answered, angrily. "I haven't time to stop listening to her nonsense. Come, let us go. I'll walk back half way with you. Come along!"

"Let her bide," commanded Molly with raised voice. "She's not at *thy* call. Ah hear t' Pigot i' thy talk, Ah see it i' thy een. A light mind an' a heavy tongue, an' love an' ride away. Jealous and soon angered they be an' all, an' there's nought so ill to live wi' as that. Yon's a Pigot. He's viewly to look at, but he mayn't be t' better for that." Her eye sought Joan.

Ralph rose noisily. "I'm off, it's the last time I come to see you, Molly Mawkin. A taste of this"—he tapped the head of his thick stick—"is what you want, that or Bedlam! Let's leave the old death's head alone!" His foot struck against something as he went to the door. He stooped and slipped it into his pocket.

Almost at that instant Joan made an exclamation of distress. "I have lost my gold bird!" she said. "Where can it be? Humphrey gave it to me. Do help me to look for it, Ralph."

He made a great show of search, and smiled to himself in the shadow. The ancient woman was confused by the sudden outcry and stir; she looked wistfully at the door.

"T' lass is varry long i' comin' back," she complained.

To Joan's distress the jewel was not found, in spite of Ralph's assiduous search and her own. At last she was reluctantly obliged to own that it had probably been lost in the road.

"And yet I thought I had it as I came in to Yorely."

Ralph smiled again, this time at a magpie

which fluttered over the post-office like a huge tropical butterfly. "It's true enough," he pleasantly reflected, "*one* for ill-luck !"

Joan made a cup of tea for Molly, who was shaken and perturbed, and, after soothing her with assurances that the truant would soon be back, left the cottage anxious to renew her search.

She herself looking at one side and Ralph at the other, they walked slowly towards Parsifal. He was still smarting under the sting of Molly's words, and Joan's distressed expression, as she sought in vain, irritated him still further. He had put the jewel into his pocket half involuntarily, intending to give it to her later, for the fun of seeing her grateful to him. But every minute confirmed him in a new intention. He would keep it as long as he chose, and he would exact a price—anything his mind happened to desire at the time. If he kept her waiting long enough, she might be willing to pay for it liberally, it might even be with a kiss ! That was something to look forward to. He glanced at her.

"I suppose you're a bit afraid. You don't

know how he'll take it, eh? You look as worried as if you'd lost a thousand pounds."

"I am not at all afraid of Humphrey." Joan was immediately on the defensive for Humphrey's sake. "He wouldn't say a word. But *I* mind; can't you understand? Besides, it's such a careless thing to do."

"He's become a bit of a saint then, lately, has he? No more of the old fly-outs,—what a witch you must be!" Joan restrained herself.

"We are all better tempered now—even you, Ralph," she said, mischievously.

"Well"—he spoke in his old jaunty way—"there's no telling what I shall be when I marry Jane Caley."

She paused, before speaking, in astonishment.

"Oh!" she said at last, "is it really true?" She turned her bright, eager face to him. "Is it, Ralph? I love Jane; there isn't anybody as good and sweet in Askedale—and so pretty! I wonder if you are joking?"

Ralph delayed his answer. He was inwardly contrasting the vivid beauty of the girl beside

him with Jane's moonlight loveliness. Her ardent partisanship of her friend heightened every charm. She fascinated him, as she had always done. Jane's lily face and tender eyes, in contrast with this glow and life, drifted like some pale ghost before his inward eye.

"By——!" he burst out in a sudden gust of passion, "you're not as quick as you used to be! I suppose it's making a saint of Humphrey that's damped your sense a bit. What's her namby-pamby goodness to me? You're good, I take it: a deal too good. Do I look the man to marry that white-faced baby, *Jane Caley*?" He infused a bitter contempt into the name, and ended in an oath.

Joan could no longer hold herself. She went back from him, surveying him with mingled disgust and shame.

"No," she said, a stern vibration in her tone, "you don't! You look what you are"—she caught her breath—"a bad, bad man, and you are not worth one of her fingers. How," she exclaimed, tears of anger in her eyes, "how dare you speak her name? You never shall

again to me, never ! Stay there ; I wouldn't walk with you, no, not if I had to stand here all night. *Dear Jane !*"

Ralph was livid-pale, his eyes lightened, but he was silent, neither did he attempt to follow. He had the air of one taking a final decision, of one who at last had registered an irrevocable vow. But this was unseen by Joan. She was too indignant to look at him. She sped along the high road, forgetting the loss of her jewel in pity for her friend and a surging antipathy to Ralph. Her heart burned within her. She called at the Caleys upon her way home, and amazed and distressed Jane by a sudden flood of tears as they sat together in the best parlour.

"Joan ! you're not a bit like yourself to-day. You're quite tired out." She hung over her with gentle words and caresses until Joan calmed herself. "It's so nice to look after you Joan, proud Joan ! Just try to be ill—nothing dreadful, but enough to let us pet you and nurse you. Now, tell me what it was."

That was impossible ; the other cast about for an excuse.

"I was worried this afternoon, and then I lost my dove that Humphrey gave me, at Yorely I think, perhaps at Molly Crowther's."

"What a pity ! I *should* be vexed." Jane was truly compassionate ; such a loss she felt might excuse perennial tears. She was sure her father would call at Molly's on his way to church to-morrow ; she showed in her sympathy how unlikely it was that such a thing could be irretrievably lost. But when Joan was out on the road she peeped through the nearly shut door, sheltering herself from the cold wind, and called her back, her face rippling with child-like fun and mischief.

"I shall tell Humphrey," she cried ; "never did I think to see Joan Seaton upset about a trinket, she's but a human lass after all."

That evening Joan told her parents of Molly's unusual excitement and her inhospitable reception of Ralph. "Are they a very bad set, father ?" she asked. "John Pigot has only to look at me to scare me."

"Bad and good, my dear, like the rest of us," he answered.

Mrs Seaton lifted her head. "Don't say that, Anthony; whatever the other families may have done, and there have been some shocking Stansfelds, there was never a Seaton like John Pigot of Lower Ghyll."

"Every now and then, perhaps," confessed her husband, "there is a queer Pigot—I grant you that. It seems as if he wasn't bound by other folk's principles, but it's only now and then."

"I am afraid it's *now*," said his daughter, sombrely, taking up her bedroom candle.

"Is it Marmaduke she means?" asked her father, as Joan went meditatively upstairs.

"I think it's Ralph," answered his wife. "She dislikes him beyond everything."

"Ralph; poor fellow, what has the child got into her head about him?"

A delicate old blush came to Mrs Seaton's sorrow-worn cheek. "I fancy he's got the same thoughts about her, as—as Marmaduke—had about me, and she thinks he's badly disposed to Humphrey."

"Is that all?" The master of the house laughed a contented laugh; "well, love, you didn't take it much to heart, did you?"

"Joan is better than I am," she answered, quietly; "perhaps Molly's words have taken hold of her too, she has a queer mind in some ways, and she's more sensitive than ever I was."

"I don't think she need bother herself about the lad. He's lazy and he's quick tempered, but he's not another John Pigot; one's enough in a hundred years. Ralph has been Humphrey's friend since they were in petticoats." And Mr Seaton lapsed into beneficent memories of Humphrey's playmate, and *Kirster's*.

CHAPTER XI

"LOVE TO THE RESCUE"

IT was the snowstorm of this spring which exalted Nat above all the weather-wise of Parsifal — Sally not excepted. I suspect that he had no serious meaning in his remark to Mrs Seaton, it arose out of a mere association of ideas. But the fulfilment of his prophecy was nothing short of miraculous to Parsifal. It took him all his time, for years, he afterwards confessed to me, to speak with sufficient caution to preserve his reputation. In the intense cold of the night one of the old people died, and the life of the newly-born flickered as if the wind of Death were blowing.

The dale, which had been radiantly green on Friday, was by Sunday morning a valley of snow beneath a faint grey sky. On Friday night it had lain moon-white under a shining heaven, every cleft and tree visible, as yet undarkened

by the masses of billowing cloud in the north. On Saturday no object could be distinguished a yard from the house, there was little wind, and the flakes fell like a fleece. Askedale lost hundreds of its lambs in the next four and twenty hours, and the hand of winter blotted out every flower of the Spring.

The snow lay half-way up the walls bordering the high road and dividing the meadows, and where the stones had fallen it obliterated them, and joined field to field. The sun hid his face, and a light frost bound the surface and glittered on the wheel-tracks made by young Heseltine's gig at daybreak.

There was no service in the little chapel that morning; everybody was busy within the house and without, repairing damage and nursing the weaklings of the farmyard. Joan had all that was left of two broods of newly-hatched chickens nested in flannel in the kitchen fender. She and her mother were doing Martha's work, whose cough had kept her at home.

The master of the house was a prisoner by the fire in the Sunday parlour, distressed about

his lambs and for the flocks of the dale. There were three authors at his elbow—Jeremy Taylor, John Bunyan, and Thomas à Kempis, but under present circumstances he preferred the Bible on his knee.

From time to time his deep melodious voice was heard in the kitchen singing. And once his wife, passing the half-closed door, stopped to listen.

“O, the hour when this material
Shall have vanished as a cloud ;
When, amid the wide etherial,
All the invisible shall crowd !
And the naked soul, surrounded
With realities unknown,
Triumph in the view unbounded—
Feel herself with God alone.”

She pushed the door open softly. His eyes were closed, and on his uplifted face was a transfiguring peace.

She hurried away with a half-sob. “I must make the most of him here,” she reflected miserably. “I am afraid I shall never be near enough to him there to speak to him.” But that was not Mr Seaton’s view.

In the afternoon Joan brought him a dish of filberts. "They are from Sally, father. She has just been to see if Kransu had taken shelter here. He has been away all night, and she is quite upset about it. She thinks he has come to some harm, and is buried, perhaps, under the snow."

"That isn't my notion of Kransu," said her father; "he's better able to take care of himself than either you or Sally. He once stayed a couple of days at Thurstane, by the by."

"He did; I remember now. It was when Cousin Kirster died, and he came back with you the next morning. I think I will run out and remind Sally. All the farm lads have been sweeping the street, headed by Nat, and the snow is piled higher than the garden wall, so I shall go to hear Mr Metcalfe to-night. I haven't many more chances of hearing the dear Passon."

"It will always be Danbrigg Church after June," he said, playfully.

"You wouldn't want me to leave Humphrey, should you?"

"No, no; where he goes thou must go,—

but the Passon's sermons are better than the Danbrigg man's. I could wish it was Yorely and Mr Frystone, if it isn't to be the Passon."

Joan leaned over the back of his chair, and rested her chin upon his head. "Such a Passon and such a father!" she said in a low voice.

Mrs Seaton entered with her old quick step—her face was indignant and stern.

"Whatever do you think, Anthony?" she exclaimed, "Kransu has come back shamefully hurt—somebody has stabbed him. Sally carried him here; come and look at him."

Mr Seaton followed her as fast as he could, and Joan flew before them into the kitchen.

Sally sat on the floor where the wounded dog lay, wiping her tears and stroking his heaving body; the milk-white chest was draggled with blood.

"Where has he com fra'? Where has he beeän? He's as weäk as a nigh-drowned kitling. Eh, he's beeän a terrable lang jog! Tremindjious! See t' blude! He wer i' t' snaw at t' Passon's gate, an' there's a gurt patch o' red where he ligged hissel' doon."

"It's been a knife, father," said Joan, crying too, "look at his head." She was wetting the poor animal's muzzle with the brandy which her mother had put into her hands.

"I wonder who the coward is!" Mr Seaton's face was flushed with anger. "Some brutal scamp who tried to steal him, and struck him with his knife when he struggled to escape. That's my notion. Poor lad!"

"See," said Joan, overjoyed, "he just licked my hand. I do feel proud, Sally!"

"Ay, it's a thing to be proud on! Kransu, Kransu, lad, dost thoo see thy old mistress, dost thoo, then?" The tail wagged feebly, and there was the glisten of an eye.

"Ah got a gliff of his een that minute," cried Sally, ecstatically. "Iff you'll tak' care on him for a bit, Ah'll fetch my bits o' things, salves and sike-like. Ah've a salve 'at'll cure him, if he's iver to be cured. Let t' blude stop, deänt wash it off."

With Joan's help Kransu, more patient and enduring than a human being, was tended and his head bound up. He bore his suffering with-

out a moan or a quiver. But when Nat and Sally had carried him back to Passon Metcalfe's, and after he was laid upon a folded rug in the chimney corner, he began to be uneasy and restless, his limbs twitching and his eyes fierce. He lifted his bandaged head from time to time, sniffing the air with a menacing growl.

"Na, lad, thoo mun be quiet, if thoo'rt to be better," admonished Sally, patting him. "There now, let's both on us get a bit o' sleep. Ah'm fair finished mysel'." She fetched a low rocking-chair, and placing it within reach of him, took off her starched, spotless cap and wrapped a shawl round her head and shoulders.

The dog lay still, but for a kind of sullen mutter and a lift of the ear. But these marks of wakefulness kept his anxious mistress from her needed rest. She put wet cloths dipped in one of her wonderful infusions upon his swollen and burning feet, but he whined dismally each time that she bade him go to sleep. His excitement told upon her; she began to be agitated herself. The old sleep-charms, half Pagan half Christian, that she repeated, had no

effect upon herself or upon Kransu, yet her consciousness seemed to be forsaking her. Slowly, too, the snow-covered world outside heaved and took another form, the familiar walls fell away. "It's comin' over me ageeän," she murmured, "but whatever is there to see? Ah'm all of a quake. Where am I?"

She was alone in the snow, upon a mountain-side; a few flakes still fluttered down; her eyes were tired and dim. But as she stood astonished there, her sight grew stronger. Before her were two men and behind them yawned a great hole: a deep rent in the earth, set about with white shrouded bushes, the chasm itself ink-black upon the snow.

"It's t' Pot-hole," she gasped, "t' ould Pot-hole of Ingleborough side. Eh, Ah haven't seen it this forty year. What are they agate of?" She shook with fear, and wrung her hands. For the two who had been looking into the abyss, their backs towards her, and whose deep tracks were plainly visible under the clearing sky, now faced each other. They were Humphrey Stansfeld and Ralph Pigot!

What Ralph said she could not hear, but it brought Humphrey within a yard of him, staring and indignant. They talked together with excited gestures, and Sally made efforts to reach them ; but the earth held fast her feet, and she could not lift up her voice to call.

Suddenly, with a dark and secret smile, Ralph held aloft a thing that swung and sparkled in the light, and Humphrey rushing at him, furious, closed with him and strove to snatch it from his hand. Whatever it was, it dropped beneath their feet and was forgotten in the fight that followed. The dry snow flew as they plunged in it to right and left. She could see the white passion of Humphrey and the cruel glitter in the other's eyes. At last Humphrey was forced to his knees ; another moment and he had Ralph by the throat on the ground, a couple of feet from the mouth of the jagged pit.

Ralph freed his hand,—there was a flash of yellow out of the bushes, and Kransu sprang and seized his sleeve, but the hand with a gleam in it struck downwards, and the dog rolled over. Two swift stabs at the man above

him and Humphrey swayed and fell upon the dog, his head over the abyss. Then Sally's affrighted spirit threatened to burst from the dead-weight of the flesh, for within a few yards of her Ralph deliberately rose, and in the terrible strength of his hate flung the body of his friend into the gaping blackness below.

There was mist and anguish, and confusion, and she was lying back in her rocking-chair close to the now sleeping dog—her blood torpid in her veins—the cold sweat breaking out upon her forehead. She lay there half-an-hour, coming back to life. At length she sat up and heavily gazed at the few dying embers in the grate. From those her eyes wandered to Kransu's wounded head.

"It's truth," she said aloud. "Puir dog, he's wiser nor us, he knew Ralph were after neeä¹ good. He tried to save t' puir lad, an' he's meäst likely gotten his deeath an' all. How quiet he ligs there! Ay, it's truth." She sat still for another hour, weak and stupid, feeling about in her mind for some way of action, and perpetually baffled.

¹ neeä—no.

The kitchen clock chimed seven. "Sha'll be in t' chapel, Ah doubt. Well, Ah mun fetch her oot, if they're i' t' varry middle o' t' prayer. If it's neän altogether true, it meeäns awful doins' i' Ribbledale, an' some fearsome hurt to Humphrey."

She rocked herself to and fro. "Lord God Almighty," she cried, "deeänt tak' all my barns, deeänt! Pity 'em an' save 'em,—world without end."

Joan was sitting alone in her father's great square pew, her face rosy in the red light of the open brazier upon the chapel floor.

To a dweller in Parsifal there is nothing strange in the little chapel where is taught the "old Parsifal religion." That it should be no larger than a cottage-room, that the minister in the pulpit nearly touches the ceiling, that the two big pews of the chief believers take up more than half of the floor space: and that the east wall where stands the pulpit, is almost all window, giving to the worshippers a wide view of the dale towards Scropely, and its cattle in a thousand fields, creates in him no surprise

because of long familiarity. To the stranger who mounts its precipitous steps, a first service there is all surprise. And when I came back, the ways of towns had wiped out the remembrance of the way of worshipping in Parsifal. I had forgotten that the minister bids each newcomer a solemn "Good day" from the pulpit, and that any member of the congregation, at any moment of the service, may walk up the single aisle, without remark, and correct the humours of the school children at the top—sometimes with an umbrella.

The hymns, too, many of them, are peculiar to the Parsifal religion. To the quavering harmonies of old times are still sung dark and woful words, imaginations of the human mind before it dared to welcome the light of Love Divine. Passon Metcalfe, just before the date of my story, had for ever estranged John Howden and a few of the older men and women by his custom of giving out, at the end of the service, a comforting hymn. They still came to the chapel, but what gave relief to the hearts of many in the congregation was to them not

intended for public worship, but for the private and exclusive joy of a few elected saints.

On this Sunday night he had further forsaken the usual customs, and in consideration of the great loss which had fallen upon his people through the untimely winter, and in his desire to be to them an actual son of consolation, he had struck a note of comfort at the very beginning.

Joan had been greatly distressed by the wounding of Kransu and her encounter with Ralph. The loss, too, of the previous day, had troubled her more than she would have confessed. To a daleswoman, forty years ago, there was generally some evil omen attached to an accident to a gift, even that of an ordinary friend.

Many a true-hearted wife was additionally solicitous for the welfare of her husband because her wedding-ring had happened to drop from her finger, and even Joan's healthy mind had been burdened all night with melancholy presentiments, which, in the quiet of the chapel, closed upon her again. The atmos-

phere of peace and trust diffused by the Passon was very grateful to her. She looked round at the congregation in the high pews sloping steeperly back to the wall, and the same consoling influence seemed to be upon them all. A gentleness had descended even upon William Heseltine's austere features, which, on his entrance had had a brooding grimness born of the loss of his lambs, and other unfortunate consequences of the cold.

It was during the prayer, which the Passon always prefaced by the invitation—an expression of his own humility—"Let us *try* to pray," that Joan had a memorable experience which bore fruit in the time to come. Her forebodings melted away, and a lightness and ease possessed her spirit so lately filled with dulness and unrest. She was well accustomed to her father's living religion, her imagination strongly sympathised with it; but now, in a single instant, she had an unforeseen vision of her own, a vision of the love and the power of God. It was as if a face looked in at the window of her soul, and in that look and in her recognition

of it was an assurance of immortal sympathy—of eternal help. She had a glimpse of a love beyond, above, and beneath the love of her dearest, enfolding them and herself. Above all, it conveyed to her a penetrating sense of succour.

As she knelt, absorbed in a new adoration and gratitude, the door, which was immediately to her right, creaked, a blast of icy air blew the last flame aside through the bars of the brazier, and made the pulpit candles waver. Sally's body was half visible in the opening; she beckoned imperiously to Joan, and her strongly-marked face was still more urgent in appeal. Joan rose immediately, and, with noiseless feet, passed out and joined Sally on the topmost step.

The April dusk was lightened by the white reflections of the snow; she could see Sally plainly; her face was distorted and harsh in its strange excitement. The girl at once came to the conclusion that Kransu was worse, it might be—*dead*.

"Is it Kransu?" she asked, drawing Sally's arm within her own, and piloting her carefully down the slippery staircase, which led from the

ground to the second storey of the building where the chapel is.

"He's neän so well," answered the other, brief and stern, "I want you over til Passon's." She dragged Joan through the quiet "town" at a pace which robbed her of speech and breath, nor did she pause until they stood in the warm kitchen lit only by the fire. There Kransu lay, motionless as a dog's effigy.

"He does breathe;" Joan bent over him to listen; "did you think he was dead; poor Sally!" She took her old nurse in her arms and kissed her. Full of her late experience, she said ardently, "I don't think he will die, God is so good."

Sally put her from her, and stood before her, holding her hand. "He is, he is." She fastened her eyes on Joan with an intensity of solemn meaning. "My barn, He's all we've got to trist til, hauld fast to that. Ah've got sikan¹ a tale to tell thee, love."

Holding her fast, instinctively softening the roughness of her usual manner, and stroking the

¹ sikan—such.

young hand tenderly, she told her story with such conviction of its truth as would have impressed a sceptical outsider. But one detail—and that the worst—she kept back. She said nothing of Ralph's last awful act.

"Ah cudn't," she told me afterwards. "Ah thowt she'd happen ha' fallen deeäd at t' fire-side. She throw'd up her arms, and gave a skirl¹ as Ah'm niver like to forget. Ah fair dithered.² There was sike a look in her een. An' Ah hoped it weren't true, t' warst on it!"

It was not Sally's reputation for clairvoyance nor the conviction in her words that struck home to Joan, it was the certainty of her own soul. She had foreseen it all along—this was the last link of a dreadful chain.

After the first cry, with the exception of her ashen pallor, and an occasional trembling, the girl regained her self-command. Not through her native strength alone, but through a pervading sense of being upheld from without, from within; her brain, too, was quickened and kept clear.

¹ skirl—scream.

² dithered—trembled.

The young eyes piteously searched Sally's agitated face—not in doubt of her truth—but for counsel. She saw Humphrey lying by the pit-side, unconscious, bleeding, but not dead. In the miraculous influence which supported her was a faint ultimate hope, and an all-mastering urging of her to go to him.

Sally, who had replied to this mute appeal by looks of the tenderest compassion, now broke the silence. "You're wantin' to be wi' him, my barn, an' it's t'only way. We'll manage it. Eh, that it should be Humphrey!"

Joan crushed her fingers. "Not his name, Sally; I can't bear it. Don't speak his name. I dare not cry."

"That you niver shall for me, my darling," cried poor Sally, fighting with her emotion, "let's think on how to get there."

In a few minutes she had planned the whole, the girl's mind eagerly following her suggestions and directions. Nat should drive Joan; he was young and energetic, and the new mare was strong, with a good will that nothing daunted. Sally, herself, would tell Mr Seaton;

it was in the thoughts of both that Joan's mother must be shielded as long as possible from any new sorrow. As for her father, he was, Sally said, "prepared for onything, even t' end o' t' world."

When the mare's hoofs were heard outside, as Nat led her down from the minister's stable which Mr Seaton rented, there was a waft of home in the girl's conviction that whether or not her father believed Sally's tale, he would not misunderstand her action.

"You'll be wantin' mair folk nor Nat Bayne to lift him oot ——" The woman caught herself up in time.

In the twinkling of an eye both remembered Joshua Bentley. "T' varry mon, an' not aboon ¹ a mile fra' t' Pot-hole. He'd run his blude to water for you, all on you. But you mun eat afore you start, you ll want all your strength, an' mair."

Joan made no resistance; she ate the slice of ham and the toasted tea-cake not knowing what they were, only anxious to be strong.

The condition of the roads, the bitter chill of

¹ aboon—above.

the night, confirmed Nat in his conviction that Mr Humphrey was at death's door. Something awful must have happened for his young mistress to face such a state of things. He should have preferred to have a word with his master or Mrs Seaton before setting out on the perilous journey, but Miss Joan would not have it so, and at such a time she must be obeyed. He put so much willingness into his preparations that, as the congregation filtered down the chapel steps, he was driving her out of Parsifal.

As she lifted the latch of the kitchen door when Sally had finished wrapping her up, Kransu raised his head and barked. The two women started. Though he could not get upon his feet he had turned over upon the rug, and was watching Joan with keen, bright eyes.

"He kens you're gangin'," whispered Sally.

The girl ran across the kitchen and knelt down by him. "Yes, I'm going, Kransu,— dear dog, brave dog!"

What Agatha called his "*smile*" came upon his tawny face, his tail moved, and with a great breathing sigh, as if he would breathe out all his

care, at once and for ever, he stretched himself for sleep.

The road to Fors was fairly good, there had been wheels and foot-passengers upon it all day, but afterwards progress was almost impossible. Again and again the wheels stuck fast, and Joan had to help Nat to clear away the snow from them and to push the trap with all her might. There were places where the drifts were so deep that Nat was on the point of giving up the attempt to find a passage through them. And when the mare had floundered out of these there was always the desperately steep mountain road to climb.

At the inn at the top of the pass he told Joan that the mare must have rest for an hour, and seeing the condition of the animal she was forced to assent. But the delay cost her an agony. But for the entreaties of the landlady she would have set off again alone, to be lost without doubt on the mountain. In half-an-hour's time Nat, with the air of a guilty man, came in to the inn-parlour, where Joan sat drinking the tea which the sympathising land-

lady had forced upon her, and broke the news that the road was too blocked for the dogcart to proceed, and it would take a good hour to clear away the drift.

It was this which more than all else upset her courage, and her fears for Humphrey grew to a fevered anguish. Suppose in this lost hour he should die !

It seemed to her as if this baffling of her love would madden her brain. But at this acute point came afresh the merciful solacing and relief—sweet old promises read so often to her by her father floated through her aching mind—promises registered by those, who, pressed by trouble to the edge of misfortune's abyss, had found themselves received into the Eternal arms. So it was that when they came to fetch her they found her asleep.

"An' but for thy tale, Ah wouldn't wakken her, no, not if t' hoose wer' a-fire. It's killin' worrk to-neet," said the good woman of the inn indignantly to Nat.

The waiting and the sleep had done the girl so much good that she walked up the last rise

of the hill with recovered strength. And when she was in the dog-cart again every milestone registered a thanksgiving that she was by so much nearer Humphrey. Coming down, there was still much walking to do, and the wind was as a whip to her cheek, blowing from the east, and penetrating her own cloak, and Sally's, which the old woman had lent her. It was when she walked, with Nat far in the rear, that her worst anxiety seized her. In spite of the snow, it became very dark after midnight, and she had a constant dread that he would miss the way.

At last the Ribblesdale road was reached. Nat was behind her giving the mare a drink at the little hostel at the foot of the Fell, and Joan, too restless to wait, had gone on alone. Deep cart-tracks ran as far as the eye could reach; the farmers had evidently been travelling up and down the dale seeking help and giving it.

It was three o'clock, and the stars were out. She was alone at the foot of the mountains, white giants against the blue blackness of the sky. To her left was Whernside, couching along the world; far to the right, hooded with mist,

stood Penygent, and from her feet at her right hand rose the flanks of Ingleborough himself, a light cloud upon his flattened crown.

It was round the first low shoulder that Humphrey lay. She dared not, she would not, let imagination look. After the fear of his death, the thought that he was hurt and left alone cost her the greatest anguish. Each time it took possession of her she chased it from her by the reminder that she was on her way to him, and that God would yet preserve him.

Alone in this pale world lit by the stars, her body's energies no longer absorbed by the difficulties of her journey, she suddenly remembered that Nat knew nothing of her plans, nor, indeed, any details of Humphrey's "*mishap*," as Sally had described it to him. There was Joshua Bentley, too, to seek.

When, for the first time since they left Fors, they were upon a road which permitted a freer pace, she began with pain and difficulty to explain matters to Nat, as far as it was possible.

His horror was unbounded, and forced him into a demonstrative rage most unusual in a

Yorkshireman, when he learnt that not only had Mr Humphrey been set on by a ruffian, but that no one had given him even the refuge of a roof.

"Where wer their senses an' their humanity to leäve him ligging o' t' ground all neet?" He stamped with impotent anger to think that such heartless fools should exist. Joan was bound to tell him how the news had been sent through Sally. And Nat breathed more freely.

He was impressed, indeed, but there was left to him a cheery doubt of the truth of the "dreäm." In Sally's "seeins" there had been always a strange prophecy or vision of real facts. But this was so horrible that Nat refused to credit it. He would do all in his power for his sorrowful and beloved Miss Joan, who had proved her love that night in such an amazing fashion; his doubt should not make him lose a minute or an opportunity, but believe the old woman's vision to be true he would not.

"An' where's t' mon as would set on him? Would it be one o' them tinker lads, think

you?" he burst out after a silence, "did sha happen to get a look at him?"

"Yes;" there was a pause, and Joan added in a low, strained voice, "it was Ralph Pigot."

"Eh——h!" the long-drawn whistling exclamation expressed a succession of feelings—shocked astonishment—awakening fears—and slow suspicion. The Pigots were a wild and lawless people, down to the present day. But why had—Nat began to remember certain words of Martha's: market-day talk, too, at the bar—when Ralph's admiration of Joan had a place amongst other items of gossip. And Ralph's reputation was not of the best in many ways.

He looked round; his young mistress's eyes were closed. It was clear she could bear no further questions.

They reached at last the turning of the road at Ribble-head. A mile or so further, skirting the feet of Ingleborough, and they would be at Joshua Bentley's farm, one of the largest and most profitable in the neighbourhood. Joan touched his shoulder.

"Here is a note for Mr Bentley, tell him to

be *very* quick. I won't come with you, Nat, the dogcart will be lighter without me, and we mustn't lose a minute. I'll cross by the pasture there; I can see a trodden track even in this light. Stop a moment—"

"Neä, Ah cannot leäve you i' t' middle o' t' neet¹ aleän. Neä, Miss Joan, not me!"

"But you must, you shall! It's nearly four o'clock, the night is almost over. With the stars shining so brightly I can see my way as plainly as if it were daylight. Besides, I've been two or three times here with father; I know just where the Pot lies. Nat, *don't* wait!" But in spite of the passionate entreaty of her face and voice, the faithful fellow would not go.

She grasped his big, rough hand.

"Oh, what shall I do? See, people are beginning to stir, there's a man in a gig behind us. Perhaps he will help me. Nat, Nat, what would you do if it were Martha lying there? It isn't only Sally who saw it; I know it, I know it *here*." She laid her hand on her bosom.

¹ neet—night,

This last appeal was too much for Nat, and if the tale should be true, there was indeed no time to spare.

" Ah'll go, Miss Joan, choose what happens ! An' Ah think you'll be takken care on. Hap-pen t' man ahint¹ us'll set you forrard a bit, if nought else. Ah'm going."

He had no fear that a respectable farmer early on the road would be other than friendly and a help. She summoned up a smile so sweet and sad that Nat had to wipe his eyes with his woollen comforter as he lashed the mare to a gallop.

¹ ahint—behind.

CHAPTER XII

A PIGOT'S REVENGE

JOAN looked along the road. In the valley there was a milder air, and her two cloaks hung wet and heavy about her feet.

The road on the left hand side rose high above the rolling and heathery land stretching away to the hills. The snow lay in a smooth drift filling up the descent. On the right there was a wall dividing the highway from the sheep-pastures; just in front of her ran the turning along which Nat had driven. The wall of the immense upland field which she had to cross was high and strong, not difficult to climb because of the flat stone "thoroughs" which pierced it and projected from it. She could see no stile. In the corner of that wall she would leave Sally's cloak—no one would steal it.

She could plainly hear the jingle of the light cart; she now saw that it was not a gig. It

was close at hand. Was she absolutely sure that the Bogle Pot lay as high as the top of the sheep pasture? or ought she not to strike off half-way? Anything was better than a mistake.

To have come so near and to miss the way at last would be more than she could bear; she would ask the man in the cart to direct her. Dalesmen were a kindly race, he might even go with her to Humphrey's help.

At this moment he got down to tighten a strap, and she hastened towards him, Sally's cloak on her arm. The night was, as she had said, passing, and the stars were beginning to fade out of the sky.

The man bending to the buckle did not hear her footstep. She was not more than a yard away from him when he stood up and stretched his arms as if to ease their stiffness. With a curse he fell back, his eyeballs starting—it was Ralph!

What the exact processes of his mind had been since the Sunday morning I do not know. For the most part he had revelled in a fierce joy and satisfaction, the contradictions of his

nature had been swallowed up in his overmastering passion, and his last act was the fruit of it. One thought filled his mind, to the exclusion of reflection—Humphrey, whom he had come to hate with the hate of barbaric times, was dead and out of the way. All his self-satisfaction as heir of Thurstane, his odious content in the possession of Joan—where were they now? Let him laugh who wins.

Once, as he harnessed his horse to the cart which had brought him from Ribbledale, a vague question as to the risks he might be running made itself heard above his savage emotions. But he assured himself carelessly that at the worst there would only be the penalty attending a fair fight. The mountains and the stones of the mountains were blind and without a voice; there were no other witnesses. Humphrey was done with, *for ever*.

The first thrill of fear ran through him now. In the weird, cold light of the dawn her face shadowy beneath the black hood of her long cloak, deprived of speech and motion, her deep eyes fastened upon him, he took Joan for some

avenging spirit, an awful witness of his deed. He stared at her, fascinated and appalled.

But the stony expression of her eyes changed to a dreadful loathing and horror. Before her, within her very touch, stood the man who had tried to slay Humphrey, whose hands were red with his dear blood.

"Murderer!" she said, in a tense, hollow voice. The sound of the word loosened her bonds, and "Murderer!" she cried aloud, as if accusing him to the heavens and the earth.

Ralph grasped her shoulder brutally; he breathed hard as one relieved, suddenly and immeasurably. "It's you, is it?" he said, and in his eyes was a fearful exultation.

None of his race had been a more desperate villain than this man had become who now seized the defenceless girl in the lonely valley.

As he cast his eyes round the wide and solitary expanse, he had a sense of victory which gave to him the air of a debased Lucifer. He had succeeded beyond his wildest hopes, and Fortune had given Joan into his hands.

"I don't care *how* you know about it, nor

who else knows for the matter of that, but there's luck in the world after all." He snapped his fingers in the air. "It may mean a howl after me; I'm not such a fool that I can't see that, but I can give them the slip, and I've got *you*." He tightened his hold on her. "Here, get in." He dragged her to the side of the cart.

Joan had had no fear for herself, but now, at his touch, she realised that she was in the power of a bad and ruthless man, who would carry her away beyond the reach of help, and, O dreadful thought, away from Humphrey!

His touch was insupportable, his nearness to her horrible. She struggled with all her might, and for a passing second tore herself free. But the efforts of the night had weakened her, and Ralph's muscles were of steel. He caught her in one strong arm, and with the other, by a quick and stealthy movement, muffled her head and shoulders in Sally's cloak, and lifted her bodily into the cart. Joan shrieked aloud, and beat her hands against its wooden sides, but the folds about her mouth and the creaking and jingling of the cart deadened the sound.

She lay still, in the clutch of despair at last.

Probably she lost consciousness, for when she drew herself heavily into a sitting position and had freed herself from the cloak the horse was going forward rapidly, and the road up which Nat had vanished lay some distance behind.

The absolute silence of the dawn was unbroken, except for the noise of the cart and the crack of Ralph's whip. Far away under Whernside one spark of light flickered orange in the deep blue shadow of the distance. *There* were men and women with human cheerful hearts, beginning the day's hard work together, the day's hard work which companionship made sweet. She was not a self-pitying nature, and all her solicitude at this hour was for another; but she was young and nurtured in affection, and *home* to her meant a world of common sympathies and protecting love. She stretched her hands out to the spark with a heart-rending sob. Ralph flogged the poor animal impatiently, and Joan glanced anxiously round. He was close to the cart, and he was looking at her.

Terrified, broken as she was, she did not flinch under his eye ; with a proud gleam of the old indomitable spirit she returned his gaze. How bad he looked ! His dark gipsy beauty emphasised the triumphant evil of his face, it gave it a more active and fiery wickedness. He was John Pigot, young and desperate.

"I'm close at hand," he said, mocking her, "you needn't be frightened, you're not alone !"

She understood him only too well. She was utterly in his power, there was no slightest chance of escape. When he turned his head she slipped down into the body of the cart with her back to him. The sight of him she could not, would not, endure.

The head of Ingleborough was clearing fast ; in the east lay one rosy streak. In a few moments they would be behind the hill ahead, and Humphrey would lie forsaken. Even if rescued, even if restored, she would be lost to him. Not that she would live without him—never ! But would he ever know the truth ?

"O God !" she cried, all her overwhelming misery in the cry, all her despair.

"I WILL DELIVER THEE!" Was that a living voice that rang through her troubled and distracted soul? No human accents were ever so thrilling, and yet she had surely heard them. Were they veritably the voice of God?

Shaken, scarcely daring to give place to the most trembling hope, she looked out once more. Almost immediately the road would wind behind the hill. The rosy streak had multiplied, and there was a sparkle on the snow, but she saw only the receding mountain. Ralph walked on the cart's inner side, keeping the horse, which drew continually to the left, from the edge of the steep bank. Joan leaned back miserably in the corner.

"Hold up, you blasted ——" The man's shout broke off suddenly. The cart swayed violently, the back wheels slipped. There was a wild floundering of the horse, and Joan was thrown out into the drifts below.

Even in the passage of her fall she was conscious that her prayer was answered. Swift as light the knowledge came.

Dazed, but unhurt, she got upon her feet

and shook herself free from the snow. A few paces off lay the horse and cart, something struggled beneath them. Oh, if he should succeed in breaking loose and seize upon her again! She knotted the hampering mantle about her waist, its hood had fallen back. Bareheaded she climbed into the road, and ran down it with all her speed. Only twenty minutes had gone by since she first recognised Ralph; to her it had been a plunge into eternity. Still, God was good, He was on her side. She had no body; she was all heart, all desire, and God had delivered her!

Once in the great pasture, which stretched far up the hillside, her arched and nimble feet clung unerringly to the track. Breathless and panting she stopped at the topmost wall, and, having got over it, looked back. Neither horse nor cart was visible, but even from that distance she could see a small figure of a man standing at the roadside. He began to run. Terrified still, remembering that he was the fastest runner in the dale, forgetting that if he sought her at all it would be upon the high-

ways, she fled among the stones and tussocky grass as if his hand could reach her. At last she came out upon the white snowy sheet covering the broad rounded back of the Spur. Its surface was crisp and hard. Here, again, she waited to recover breath. It was in this flank of the mountain that the earth had gaped, and left the rift of the Bogle-Pot, believed by the country people to be without a bottom. Joan knew now where it lay. Hastening on she caught a glimpse of its black, irregular outline and the shrouded bushes. So near, and downwards now. The wild creatures of the hills had been that way before her, hare and fox and pheasant and the swift stoat. She recognised their tracks mechanically; one had been hurt, and there was a thin trail of blood.

The long and exhausting toil was over—she reached the sloping bank around the abyss. Voices rose on the morning air—her helpers were not far away. She ran along to the wider part of the chasm; below her, but very near, coming up the hill were four men, carrying lanterns still alight, and leading a horse

harnessed to a long, low waggon. She looked hungrily down at the narrow level between the slope and the Pot.

Trodden and bloody the snow lay—but no dead or dying man—not there, nor anywhere around !

She gave a great wail of anguish, and Joshua Bentley, first at the place, hurried towards her filled with pity and concern.

“ My dearest lass, my little Joan ! ” he cried, drawing her into his fatherly arms.

“ O, he’s not there, Mr Bentley, he’s gone, and my heart will break,” she sobbed, laying her head on the shoulder of this friend of her childhood.

“ My poor, brave little lass,” he said, brokenly, stroking the beautiful head, and searching the ground around with his eyes. There were the marks of struggle and the blood-stained snow. Yet who could have fetched him away ?

How little he knew of the accident, he reflected ! Joan’s note had spoken of it with the most urgent distress. There had been no time for anything but preparations and a very

hurried obedience. Nat, still doubtful, had kept behind the good Quaker and his men until they came within sight of the Bogle-Pot. Mr Bentley felt baffled and helpless; perhaps after the first outpouring of her grief was over Joan would explain it all; his eye wandered to the pit itself. Joan, lifting up her head, caught the direction of his glance.

"O——!" she sprang from him down the bank, and leaned far out over the low engirdling wall, which had fallen at the point where the snow had been trampled. She remained there in spite of the warning exclamations of the men, who, with Nat, had gathered upon the slope.

She gazed into the darkness. At last she turned and beckoned to Mr Bentley, her hand resting on the wall. Her cheek was bloodless, but in her eyes there was a solemn joy. "Humphrey is here," she said, slowly. "I believe he is living; come and see."

The men exchanged compassionate glances, and would have followed, but Mr Bentley waved them back. He approached with the

noiseless reverence of one entering a death chamber. Nat came softly down behind. The girl's finger was on her lips; she pointed downwards with the other hand.

And the two men, looking over, saw a sight which the dale never ceases to describe. Fifteen feet below the opening is a great and jagged rock projecting upwards from the side. From the angle six or seven saplings have sprung, and stretch out beyond the stone and over the opening of the main abyss. The snow had filled the angle completely, covering the stems of the young trees, but there were a few tender unfolding leaves, green against the blackness of the pit. It was in this cradling niche that Humphrey fell. His feet hung down, but his legs and body were supported upon the saplings and the stone.

He lay, half sunken in the snow, which had melted from his face. And upon his bosom, above his heart, rested a gentle hare.

"Marvellous!" ejaculated Mr Bentley.

Nat contemplated it in silence—all was wonderful and terrible to him.

The shy creature, roused by the voice, regarded them steadily for a couple of seconds with her full bright eye, and then leapt up the rocky side and vanished into the bushes, leaving a round, dark patch where her warm body had rested.

"He's not dead, I know it. I do know it," said Joan, passionately, to the kind Quaker, who could find no voice to answer her. In the shadow of the pit Humphrey had the air of one who was not only dead—but who had never lived, so spectre-like his face glimmered in the depths.

Not one of the whole company, now gathered round, spoke his fear to Joan. A rope was fetched from the nearest cottage and Nat, who at his entreaty was lowered to the ledge, fastened it to Humphrey with the greatest care. Slowly and with tender precautions he was drawn upwards from his tomb.

As his wounded head rose above the scattered stones, there was a profound murmur from the men. Mr Bentley put his arm round Joan, fearing that she might fall. But drawing her-

self gently away she kissed her lover's deathly face, supported on Nat's arm, softly putting aside the stiff and matted hair from his forehead. The wound was above the temple.

"My dear love—but you will live!" she said, and kissed him on the mouth. The little company looked upon her with pity, but also with something like dread, so quickly and silently did this young girl precede those who bore him to the cart, so steadily she mounted it and arranged the shawls and blankets upon the mattress at the bottom. There, in the cart, she sat down.

"It is not mere earthly strength," thought the Friend, struck by the calmness of her face. Divine upholding was not a new experience to him, it was the well-tested joy of his daily pilgrimage.

Humphrey's bearers had reached the waggon. "Lay him *here*," she said, and they laid him down with his head upon her breast.

Such restoratives as they had brought Mr Bentley tried in vain. But Joan never wavered. At the bottom of the hill the little procession

halted, some adjustment of the mattress being needed.

As the helpers stood near, strong men, yet weeping, looking on at that woful sight, the seal of death was broken on Humphrey's blue lips. "No man can ever part us," they stiffly murmured. It was the last leaping thought as Ralph stabbed him, the memory of Joan's words when their wedding was postponed. Upon the white rose of her cheek stole a faint red—her eyes flashed a rapturous confidence at Mr Bentley. At the next halt on the road, half-way to the Ribble farm, the sun burst suddenly from the clouding grey. Humphrey opened his misty eyes. Above him bent Joan's face, the sunbeams tangled in her shining hair. His dim brain was perplexed: was he little Ned in Joan's arms, or had he died, and did the welcoming angel wear her face?

CHAPTER XIII

THE MESSAGE

JOAN'S faith was realised. But for days Humphrey was nearer death than life, and for weeks he lay helpless in his bed. If there had been any noise or excitement in the house it is probable that the living grave from which he had been rescued would but have given place to the vault of his fathers.

In after years he looked back upon the first month as upon a motley dream—pain and confusion, broken lights, tender faces, and the floating scent of flowers. Sometimes he held Joan's hand, sometimes Agatha crept near and kissed him, and through wavering mists he caught a glimpse of Mrs Seaton, sad and pale. Again and again he seemed to be lifted in the arms of his cousin Anthony, and a dark man, small and fierce-eyed, irritated him by vanishing just as he was about to recognise him. After

that first month his glance steadied, his ears distinguished the voices in his room and the steps along the corridor. He remembered waking, once—it must have been night. There was a shaded candle burning on a table at the foot of the bed, and reflected in a looking-glass near the window. The window was open, he knew that, because a cool breath wandered over him, and the thin white curtain fluttered. The air that came in was very sweet. Was the hawthorn—the pink hawthorn—out already? His hands were heavy and his feet, he would go to sleep again.

Again he awoke. His head felt stronger,—the candle was burning still, and by the table a woman sat reading. She was in the high-backed dimity-covered chair—his father's? Yet he did not know her, he only knew that it was good to look at her, good for peace and rest. Her brown hair lay in two smooth bands under a close transparent cap. She was like a dove, he thought; her dress was the colour of a dove, and the little shawl on her shoulders was softly grey. Why was she there; who was she?

Presently she rose, put a piece of paper into her book to keep the place, and came to the bedside.

Her eyebrows made a little motion of glad surprise, she took his hand in hers.

"Thee doesn't know me," she said, smiling at him, mother-like.

"No," said Humphrey, speaking in the voice of someone else, a voice very low and weak; "but I like you," he added, with the child's simplicity that long illness restores to us.

"Does thee?" she answered sweetly; "then thee shall have something good to drink."

Yes, that too was satisfactory, he had never tasted anything so delicious as the beef-tea with which she fed him.

After that night he steadily improved. He watched Whernside changing colour through the day, and he counted each new blossom of the monthly rose outside his window, until the clusters grew so thick that he could not separate the flowers. And he was always hungry. He often found the dove-like figure in his room; he wondered if his mother, perhaps, had been

like that. Suddenly he knew she was Mrs Bentley, and that he was in Joshua Bentley's house in Ribbledale. A great surge of remembrance terrified him, he refused to think ! And for a week longer the summer days dawned and faded for him as peacefully as if he had been really a child, welcoming his nurse's face as the one joyful distraction of his life.

Then he began to grow restless, looking towards the door continually, listening to every sound. His appetite failed, and the uneasiness increased, until Mrs Bentley began to be anxious again.

Fred Williams it was who, sent over by Mrs Seaton, had fought Death inch by inch and conquered—though he always maintained that only the Stansfeld vitality could have survived the wound, the loss of blood, and the long exposure. He also considered that Humphrey owed a debt of gratitude to the hare, and Humphrey was so sure of it that never to this day has he shot one or suffered one upon his table. When his patient showed the first clear sign of recovery the little Welshman, in language

never before or since heard in Mary Bentley's parlour, insisted that there was not to be the slightest hint or reminder of the fateful day on Ingleborough. Even Mrs Seaton and Agatha might bring it back, and on no account was Joan to be seen or heard. Until then she had helped to nurse him, but after this she was only to sit beside him when he was asleep.

Mrs Bentley talked this new restlessness over with her husband. It was his opinion that Fred Williams should be fetched at once, and he was surprised to find that she did not eagerly approve.

"I believe it is Joan he misses, not the doctor," she said, meditating. "He misses her, though we thought he never recognised her, and lately did not even see her. Yes, I am almost sure of it. I think I shall take things into my own hands."

"I shouldn't wonder if thou did, Mary," he said, with his little whimsical smile.

"Why, Joshua, thee talks as if I was a masterful woman."

Mr Bentley's hand was on the latch, and his

horse waited at the porch, but he came back to where she stood.

"Nay, Mary, I talk as if thee was mistress, and if thee or anybody denies that, there will have to be a reckoning with me!"

A little nephew of hers once said to his mother, "Aunt Mary has such comfortable brown eyes." These comfortable eyes replied to the good Quaker now.

She went out with him into the porch and as he closed the gate leading into the paddock, he saw her still there, the jessamine sprays patterned upon her dress.

The result of her determination justified her. Between dreaming and waking Humphrey found himself in other hands than hers. There were echoes of a beloved voice in his room, and one morning Joan's red-gold hair met his waking eyes instead of the delicate net cap.

He had no chance of getting excited, because she knelt down beside him and laid her cheek to his and murmured some astonishing consolations; he never could quite remember them.

After this there were "no backenings," as

Sally said. Sally could no longer be kept away. His hours of complete wakefulness increased, his resolute ways reappeared, and in this atmosphere of cheery peace and love his memory cleared without danger. Before July came he was sitting in the garden.

Mr and Mrs Seaton and Agatha came and went; Mr Metcalfe drove over twice; there was talk of everything and everyone but Ralph. Mrs Bentley and Joan knew that he remembered, but they had never heard him speak of the Pigots nor of the journey to Ribbledale.

One day, as Joan sat reading to him under the lime tree in the paddock, a little flaxen-haired lad climbed the railings and ran towards them.

"Is this yours?" he asked, dangling her lost golden dove by its chain, "Ah fund it by t' Pot-hole."

Joan jumped up and took it from him joyfully, planting herself before Humphrey at the same time, she hoped that he had not understood. But she was too late.

"Give it to me, Joan," he said, and he took

it in his thin fingers. "It was seeing *that* in his hand after all his taunting, irritating ways while we were together the day before, and as we went up to see the Pot, that made me mad. What a wise head you had, love, you read him a great deal better than I did. I used to think you were fanciful and over frightened."

"I know," said Joan, "Humphrey, I lost this—the clasp isn't very safe. I lost it somewhere near Yorely and he found it." But the man gazing absently through the trees had evidently no curiosity on that point.

"Yes," he answered, as a sleep-walker might speak. Joan watched him anxiously. She sent the little fellow to the kitchen to tell his tale, and to ask for a pocketful of gooseberries and some of Mrs Bentley's queen-cakes as his reward.

A dozen questions were in her lover's brain; the scar of his wound throbbed, and his pulse galloped.

Joan understood, she took a sudden resolution. Sitting down at his feet on the grass, cool and sweet in her lavender print, she leaned against his knee and lifted her eyes to him.

"You don't listen to me a bit, Humphrey ! I know what it is—you are worrying yourself about all that happened on that day. Isn't that it?" He bowed his head, his face quivered. "Yes," she went on gaily, "I saw it all,—perhaps it is time to tell you. Anyhow, you shall know, just to prove to you how indulgent and kind I can be, even though I shall lay up all sorts of trouble for myself in humouring you." She became very serious ; keeping her loving eyes upon his, she told him all, from Sally's dream onwards ; but the toils of the night and the frightful adventure of the road she kept from him. They must wait, if ever he could bear to hear them.

He was very silent all day, putting things together. In the evening he lay upon the sofa, Joan beside him sewing, and Mrs Bentley sitting opposite them busy with a great herbarium on the table. She knew all the plants and ferns of the dale.

"Joan told me about my—my *accident* to-day, Mrs Bentley," he said suddenly.

She looked at the girl reproachfully,

he went on immediately, "Where is he now?"

"No one knows, my dear lad, he got away."

"I am glad of that," he said enigmatically. "And Joan saw how much quieter my mind would be if I knew all about it. It seems to me that there's a great deal to be thankful for. Perhaps it's best to say little about it, but I *am*."

Mrs Bentley smiled at him. "Thee looks it," she said heartily.

In the last week of August, Sally's dream which had outraged the Passon came true. To the great disappointment of Mr and Mrs Bentley, who wanted to keep him until October, Humphrey declared that he was strong enough to go back and superintend, at least to some extent, the harvesting at Thurstane. He was strong enough, that is, with Joan. The mortgage had been paid off long ago. Such an August for glory had never been, summer's pomp had culminated in it. There was no rain, and yet the intense heat was tempered all the day by light airs from the hills. The garden

blazed with colour, and the heather upon the mountains, red and purple under the shadows of the filmy clouds, flamed at sunset into a burning rose, which appealed to the very labourers in the field, men who had lived in Ribblesdale all their lives. Every evening they were to be seen resting on their scythes or standing still in the meadows watching the glow, drinking refreshment from its beauty.

It was Joan's belief that the dale had arranged its weather for Humphrey, and Sally said, "Ay, plaäces has their feelins. They ken when folks is a gude soort. Look at t' Ribble-farm garden, t' flowers fair hurry to cover t' groound for t' meeästress."

And the wedding day was the crown of the month. There were no bridesmaidens, but Agatha and Jane Caley came over to dress the bride. Jane wrote a letter which Joan carried in her bosom, but she did not stay for the wedding; the storm had nearly crushed the sweet harebell of Parsifal. Mr Metcalfe too was absent, he had been suddenly and imperatively called to Fors on business the day

before. For the bridegroom's sake there were no guests invited and no breakfast. But the miniature church up the dale was filled with neighbours. And Sally, brown and vigorous, looking for the first time in her life—in her out of doors clothes at least—an ordinary well-dressed old daleswoman, sat at the side.

It was her dream over again. "Heeäd and shouthers" above the rest stood Mr Seaton, Joshua Bentley was by his side, and alone at the altar, Joan, and the man she had saved. And when the bridegroom turned his head she could see the lock upon his forehead. The hair had grown thickly and hidden the wound, but it was snowy-white.

"Eh! dreeäms are gude to trist til," she said below her breath, "but you mun be varry onderstandin'. Ah thowt—Him 'at's above presarve us—it wer goin' to be t' other!"

In a group stood Mrs Seaton, the gentle Quakeress, and Agatha.

There could be no jollity or merriment connected with such a wedding, but every man and woman in the church came with thankful

hearts, and Mr Frystone had to wait twice or thrice to steady his voice.

Sally shared the honours of the day with the bride and bridegroom. Few knew exactly what her part had been in saving Humphrey, but everybody believed that but for her he would have died on the mountain-side.

It was a great moment for the spectators when Humphrey and Joan walked down to the old woman and kissed her. Borne on a wave of sympathetic emotion, they gathered round her outside, shaking hands with her and congratulating her on this happy ending of sorrows.

Sally bore her popularity with homely dignity and a twinkling eye. She made no explanations, but some of her replies to those who questioned her are proverbs to this day.

"They wer varry well-meänin'," she said, in describing the scene, "but Ah wished 'em all aback o' beyont. Ah wer that full, Ah could scarce bide. My barns had juist tell't me 'at their hooäm wer mine, an' would be till t'end, till Ah wer carried oot feet forrard, as you may say. Happen Ah shall be gannin' there some day!"

The dale had done with Ralph. It was a year and eight months since he had left it, but public opinion was not less incensed against him, but more. Feelings are not transient in Askedale. It was understood that the Seatons and Stansfelds had resolved to bring no charge against him; but that, if he had appeared, would have kept no man or woman from bringing him to justice.

There was not a household in the dale that by this time had not thrilled to the story. The revenge, the miraculous vision, the victory of a girl's love, had been repeated a thousand times wherever two people had met. The native rhymesters had strung it together, ballad form, and the leading Yorkshire papers commented upon it as sympathetically as if their editors had been merely human.

In the valley itself there was a sense of shame. No such doings were remembered by any but Molly Crowther and a few who were verging on their century. When a Deep-dale or a Wharfedale man met one from Askedale, the latter was generally too busy for conversation beyond what

strictly related to buying and selling. The deeds of old time preserved in the chap-books, and handed down from generation to generation with delight, lost their romantic halo when repeated in the present day and brought the dale into disgrace. At Fors market, for weeks, there were groups of stern-faced farmers in the streets and in the inn discussing the event, and considering how to reach the villain.

In this temper people were scarcely shocked to hear that Marmaduke Pigot had solemnly cursed his son, and had vowed to deliver him up with his own hand if he ever set foot in the Riding. The only time his brother John Pigot of Lower Ghyll, had been known to flinch, was at Fors Market a fortnight after Ralph's disappearance. The space before the inn and between the stalls was filled with men from the wide country around. He guessed the reason of the unusual crowd, but he rode leisurely through it on his black cob, wearing his ordinary cold and sinister expression.

Just before he reached the inn door he was generally recognised. His character was well-

known, and his cruel, contemptuous face stirred the undemonstrative Yorkshiremen to fury. There was a deep-chested roar from the throng ; and the nearest men pressed on with such menace behind the horse that he threw himself off, and rushed in at the open door—the colour of chalk. Hard as he was, it was full summer before he ventured there again. Marmaduke himself did not come to the market for three years, but it is fair to add that pride, not fear, prevented him.

Stray whispers floated about that Ralph was back again with his uncle in Mexico ; and Sally's sailor-nephew David swore that he had seen him at Cadiz, more Spanish in appearance than the Spaniards ; but there was no authentic information.

About Christmas-time Parsifal had a new shock. The Passon was going away ; it might be for six months, it might be for more ! For thirty years he had not taken a holiday, except for "a two-three days, nows and thens," at his sister's son's in Deep-dale, and it was only when he had made it known to every

family separately that Parsifal believed the news.

It was understood that he had "a bit o' money put by," and perhaps he had saved something, though that, considering his income and his charities, was not likely. He had made the best provision he could for the little chapel in his absence, and occasionally a gleam of interest shot through Parsifal, for the new minister was young, and had had questionable advantages.

One source of their pride in their Passon was that, though the *Yorkshire Times* had called him a fine scholar, he had been amongst them from his boyhood. His gifts were his own and Parsifal's! Why should he go? And to London, of all places! William Heseltine said that he had once been there, and a more wretched man there wasn't in England. Processions and throngs in every street, no rest by day, nor sleep by night. It was too big for a man to ken it in a life-time, and every blade of grass was shut in with palings, so that not a barn could touch it. He saw some fine sights, maybe, but he saw a vast more of misery—men,

ay, and women too, whose clothes were dropping from their backs. And the air fair reeked of gin. For himself, he continued, he was that low-spirited before the week was out, what with the cruel heat, and the "maddling" of the noise, that he sat in the shade of a water-butt the last two days, smoking his pipe and trying to fancy that the dropping of the tap was the trickling of the beck. He heard a deal of the Tower, and Windsor, and the Zoological Gardens, but he preferred the water-butt and his thoughts of home.

What the Passon was going for, unless it was to convert souls, he couldn't imagine. If it was for that, he said, grimly, he might as well stay at home.

To the question, "Why should he go?" Mr Metcalfe asked another in reply, "Had he not deserved a holiday?" There was, of course, but one answer to that.

Still, there was general tribulation. Mr Frystone walked over, before breakfast, the day after he heard the tidings. And he informed the Passon that away from home he was no more

able to take care of himself than—"that pup," he finished, pointing to a young Gordon setter of Jack Caley's, which had gambolled in at the open door.

"Do I look like that?" enquired the Passon, innocently.

The contrast between his slender, now bending figure and the rollicking puppy tickled Mr Frystone. His frown relaxed, and he laughed.

"But, seriously, why are you going? Now, if you will wait a few weeks longer, I'll take a three months' holiday myself. We will go to Florence, and on to Naples, together. Virgil's tomb, my dear fellow—I believe in that tradition—just think of it!"

The Passon shook his head.

"I am bent on a pilgrimage, but not to Virgil's tomb!"

"Where, then?" said the vicar, abruptly, scrutinising his friend from under his brows. "Have you taken a leap from Calvin's arms into Roman Catholicism?"

The Passon shut the study door. Later, when Mr Frystone passed Sally, who was scattering

sand on the frosty path of the bare little garden where the stunted gooseberry bushes caught the wind round the corner, he stopped to speak to her. His keen, eagle-nosed face relaxed. "The Passon is too good for Parsifal, Sally."

Her strange eyes flashed. "Have you juist fun' it oot, Mr Frystone? Whya—Ah've been thinkin' this lang while 'at he's too gude for this warld—Yorely an' all!"

"I believe he is," said the Vicar, seriously, foregoing his usual tilt with her.

The Seatons, with Agatha, had spent a quiet Christmas at Thurstane. There were no gay doings, for Joan was not yet strong, though a baby Kirster was nearly three months old. The doctor said that she had not yet got over the horrors of that night eighteen months ago and the strain of Humphrey's illness. Sally was back at the Passon's, putting his house in order and preparing him for the journey; her reflections agreed with William Heseltine. The Stansfelds were with Joan's father and mother for the New Year.

It was evening in the old house-place. The

window and the bowls on the carved press were decked with bright-berried holly; and the fire blazed so wide and high that the candles paled; but the stars looked in at the window.

Joan lay back on the chintz cushions of the settle, her colour less brilliant but not less beautiful than of old. She wore a dress that she had found amongst the treasures at Thurstane, and had re-made. It was a woollen material of a soft, old-fashioned blue, and there was a wandering thread of silver in it, powdering it with delicate flowers and glimmering in the folds. She had kept it for this home-coming.

Her father sat beside her, puffing leisurely at his pipe. But he was not in his usual place. Sally occupied his chair, and on her knee lay the little Kirster, surveying the nearest candle serenely. Mrs Seaton, older-looking now than her husband, stood with her arm round Agatha, the two of them worshipping the baby.

Humphrey, well and strong, with no sign of his adventure beyond the white lock above his temple, leaned upon the back of Mr Seaton's

chair. He had an air of amusement, and he looked more at his wife than at his son. His feeling to the latter was as yet friendly rather than paternal. He was glad that Joan should have this new delight, and whenever he caught sight of the little white-capped head upon Sally's arm, he was conscious of being intensely glad that the mortgage was paid off and that Thurstane was free. It was a satisfaction to him, too, that the boy would be a "red Stansfeld," like his mother. Kransu lay healed and happy, on the rug ; there was a dent in the soft thick hair of his head, but no worse consequences of Ralph's thrust.

There was a knock at the door. No one heard it, and the Passon entered unannounced. He was dressed for travelling, in a large double cape, his broad felt hat and thick gloves he carried in his hand. There was a general outcry of welcome and lamentation.

"Don't move, not any of you," he said, quickly, and he urged Mr Seaton back into his chair. "This is how I should like to remember you until I come back again."

"And you go to Fors to-night?" said Agatha, sorrowfully, smoothing the thick cape.

"Yes, yes, in a few minutes, Agatha; but show me the little king! I see he has already dispossessed his grandfather." He bent over the child.

"You might wish him a gude wish afore you start, Passon," said Sally, lifting the baby for him to kiss.

"Let us all wish him something, as the New Year is coming in so soon," said Joan, leaning on her elbow. "You, mother, first."

Mrs Seaton, wearing the black dress she would never put off again, gazed down at the little face with indescribable fondness. The words trembled, "I wish that he may be just like *my* Kirster."

"And I," added Agatha, scarcely above a whisper, drawing closer to her.

Sally was obviously incensed—it was a wish that she felt to be inconsiderate, if not unlucky. To speak of her baby at such a moment in conjunction with a dead man, however beloved, was a wilful tempting of misfortune.

"What soort o' a wish is yon?" she ejaculated crossly. "Throwin' gude words awaäy, Ah call it. Why, isn't t' barn his varry image? Did ony mon iver see sikan¹ a length?" She put her hand over the little feet to show their distance from his head. "An' sike limbs, an' a heeäð Kirster's varry own! Bein', as he is, a Stansfeld, hoo can he help t' colour o' his hair an' een?"

"God bless him," said Mr Metcalfe, on whose thumb the baby-fingers had closed.

"That's t' best," she said. "We'll have no mair wishin' to-day." She laid the baby against her shoulder, crooning low, and patting him as if she would console his mind for his grandmother's speech.

"And I must go," said the Passon, holding Mrs Seaton's hand in a long clasp. After the farewells he stood a moment—waiting. He had something more to say. The others saw it and were silent; tears were in the women's eyes. He evidently found it difficult to speak.

¹ sikan—such.

"I have never told you," he at last began, "though you are my dearest friends, where I am going."

"To Lunnon!" interrupted Sally.

"But afterwards—after London! It is only because I trust you as I do myself that I can tell you now. If I am worthy the name of a minister I must have a care of my lost sheep. I am going to find Ralph." There was a stir among them, and an exclamation from Humphrey. "He is in Spain and ill with fever. I may have an opportunity of helping him—of showing him a better way;" he looked at Mr Seaton, whose eyes were fixed upon him; "I have no right to ask you to forgive him, but I ask you to bear me no malice for going to him—"

"No, no," they all said, coming nearer to him. His glance wavered—he coughed, hesitatingly.

"If in your hearts," he went on, with increasing difficulty, "you could find one word which might in better days encourage him—" He halted, and looked appealing at Mr Seaton. There was no answer.

My uncle, Anthony Seaton, was a good

man, better than most of us can hope to be, but at this moment his heart made no response. He was still tortured by the recollection of his only daughter's journey through the night and the snow. Every fibre of him shook when he pictured to himself that scene on the road in Ribblesdale. As for Humphrey, it is true that he had given up all thought of prosecuting Ralph if he returned to the country. But the memory of that night roused in him such a bitter passion of grief and rage, that for Joan's sake he strove to hide it from himself.

The two men stood together stern and silent; the white horseshoe was just visible on Humphrey's forehead. The Passon turned to Mrs Seaton, but her eyes were cast down—Ralph had cost her too dear—and Agatha was kneeling by the little Kirster.

"Well," he said, sighing heavily, "it is but just. Farewell, Anthony!"

At this moment my cousin, Joan, slid from the settle and stood before the Passon, beautiful and fair, her colour coming and going. Sally said that the firelight caught the blue and silver of

her dress, and that she looked as if she had slipped down from the starry sky outside.

"Wait, dear Passon," she said. "If an old man like you can go so far alone, all to help and save him, surely I—with all this," she flung her hand out towards her baby with one of her unconscious, heart-moving gestures, "surely I can forgive him. I do; if ever it can help him, tell him I forgive."

"Joan, my dear," said poor Mr Metcalfe brokenly, "you are a good woman, and you will have a good son. I shall keep those words as my best treasure." A sudden beauty shone in his eyes. "But it is far more Christ-like for you to send that message than for me to journey over the seas to find him. I loved his mother my dear—I have loved her all my life. She was Ellen Heseltine, and Ralph is her only son."

Before a word could be spoken he had gone out and closed the door.

THE END.

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